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Charles Dickens and national identity: Poverty,
Wealth and Empire

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the concepts of poverty, wealth and empire in the work of Charles Dickens. The concepts are widely known and have been the subject of countless books and academic studies since Charles Dickens's death in 1870. Yet what seems to have been given less attention is a close analysis of how these concepts were inextricably linked and bound together in Dickens's novels, and in the society they reflected. This study aims to address that deficit. The concepts of poverty, wealth, and to a lesser extent, empire formed the bedrock of all Dickens's novels, and it was Dickens's close observation of these aspects of society that formed the basis of his work's clarion call for major social reform in the nineteenth century. This study establishes Dickens's credibility in accurately portraying these concepts by analysing the influence of social reformers of the time, such as Friedrich Engels, Henry Mayhew, Thomas Carlyle, and Edwin Chadwick. Some of Dickens's novels are omitted due to the sheer scale of his output, but the study closely examines the novels *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Bleak House* (1853), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *Great Expectations* (1861), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), as well as Dickens's periodicals, *Household Words* (1850-1859) and *All the Year Round* (1859-1870). This study aims to demonstrate how poverty, wealth and empire, and their intricate, closely-bound relationship, as reflected in the work of Charles Dickens, formed the nucleus of British national identity of the time, and informed national policy and decision-making at every level of society.

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Introduction

Charles Dickens is a monument to nineteenth-century culture. His vast body of work, including novels, journalism, writings, letters, plays and speeches, were hugely influential in reflecting a society coming to terms with the challenges of its time. His novels, published in serial form, ensured huge popularity, with no aspect of society safe from his satirical wit. Dickens, though, was no *Punch* commentator; he was a serious social writer, who used his work to reflect deep social divisions within society, and to call for social reform and change. His themes covered all aspects of society, from the top to bottom, but the overriding themes he would revisit novel after novel were those of poverty and wealth and how these were bound together and became infused with British imperial ambition. It is these themes that this study will examine in relation to how they reflected society of the time and came together to form the nucleus of British national identity.

Chapter one aims to show how poverty was part of British national identity in the nineteenth century. That is not to say that poverty, merely through its existence, is part of any given society's identity, because any free human co-existence and co-habitation, when established from an equal footing and with equal rights, will inevitably deviate and show different degrees of income, wealth and social mobility, based on merit and hard work. Rather, the chapter aims to show how poverty in Britain, as portrayed in the work of Charles Dickens, was part of its national identity because it was exasperated, prolonged and caused by social, political and economic policy on a national scale. The chapter looks at Dickens's depictions of poverty and how they were influenced by the work of social reformers such as Friedrich Engels, Henry Mayhew, Thomas Carlyle, and Edwin Chadwick. It examines the great social

change that occurred as a result of industrialisation and the effect increased urbanisation had on British society. The chapter also examines the ‘Condition of England’ question¹ and the growing calls for social reform as a response to the slums and the squalor and the scenes of severe deprivation in Britain’s towns and cities. Chapter two, on wealth, aims to show how these policies were founded on utilitarianism and Carlyle’s concept of Mammonism, and in how these formed part of British national identity of the period. The chapter examines society’s obsession with wealth and how this corrupted and corroded all aspects of society through Dickens’s representation of financial speculation and financial crashes of the time. The chapter also examines the relationship between wealth and poverty, and how the pursuit of wealth and materialism, founded on laissez-faire utilitarianism, created huge inequality and exasperated poverty. Finally, Chapter three aims to show how these aspects of British life and identity were transformed and projected onto the world stage through the empire, and how this was reflected in Dickens’s work. Race and concepts of racial superiority are also examined in relation to how they contributed to British ideas of empire. The chapter aims to show how ideas of empire became inextricably linked to those of poverty and wealth, and how this triumvirate of interconnecting concepts formed the fabric of British society and identity of the period.

In assessing Dickens’s journalist work, in relation to these ideas, it is important to note that Dickens did not write every article and essay in his periodicals, *Household Words* (1850-1859) and *All the Year Round* (1859-1870), and that these were written by many different writers and contributors. The following work, however, rather than identifying authorship of every article and essay, takes the view

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism* (London: James Fraser, 1840), Internet Archive, (<https://archive.org/stream/chartism02carlgoog#page/n7/mode/2up>), p. 1.

that as Dickens took his role as the periodicals' editor-in-chief seriously and carefully vetted every contribution, sometimes rewriting articles entirely,² the views contained in the pieces, whilst in many cases not written by him or not necessary written by him, were, in all likelihood, endorsed by him.

² *The Victorian Web* (<http://www.victorianweb.org/periodicals/hw.html>)

Chapter One: Poverty

Poverty in the nineteenth century was an ever-present aspect of Victorian life in Britain's towns and cities, and the work of Charles Dickens vividly depicts the conditions of poverty and the urban poor during the period. He describes the filth, squalor and destitution that co-existed and lived side-by-side with the affluent and the well-to-do.³ He bore eye-witness testimony to the streets, sights, sounds and smells during his long walks and research for his novels and his periodicals, *Household Words* and *All The Year Round*. In depicting these scenes, Dickens wrote his novels in a style that presented them almost as a social history. In *Oliver Twist* (1838), the omniscient narrator describes the story as a 'history'.⁴ Dickens is Oliver's biographer.⁵ Dickens does this for authenticity and to give the novel more gravitas in reflecting urban poverty of the time. He also does it to counter criticisms of exaggeration and sensationalism,⁶ as he does in *All the Year Round's* 'What is Sensational?' (1867). The story he tells in *Oliver Twist*, though a fiction, reflects everyday life and experiences of the poor and the deprived, of orphans, and the workhouses he witnessed during his research that he conveyed in his periodicals in articles such as 'A Walk in a Workhouse' (1850), 'Spitalfields' (1851) and 'Slavery in England' (1867). Dickens's portrayal of urban poverty, present in all his novels, but especially in *Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *Bleak House* (1853), and *Hard Times* (1854), was also substantiated and collaborated by the work of other social reformers of the period such as Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), Henry Mayhew's *London Labour*

³ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991), p. 382.

⁴ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 207.

⁵ *Oliver Twist*, p. 42.

⁶ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 382.

and the London Poor (1851)—a vast social study that Dickens had almost certainly consulted when embarking on *Bleak House*—,⁷ Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843), and Edwin Chadwick’s Sanitary Report (1843). Studies such as these expose Carlyle’s ‘The Condition of England Question’,⁸ and Dickens aimed to do the same through his literary examination of poverty, sanitation, the New Poor Law (1834) and the workhouses. Dickens, then, in order to convey the Condition of England question, fictionalised the work of these social reformers, and his aim was to break the apathy, ignorance and indifference he thought society and the ruling class displayed towards the poor, for ‘[w]hat the poor are to the poor [...] little [is] known’,⁹ despite the scenes of severe poverty, inequality and deprivation being present almost in every street of every town and every city. Dickens, through his novels and his work, aimed to rouse society from its lethargy and ignorance. His letters indicate his social reformist intentions, and, by implication, the credible portrayals of poverty in his work, for, in attempting to rouse society into demanding reform, he knew ‘of nothing that can be done beyond keeping their wrongs [society’s] continually before them [in his work and novels]’.¹⁰

Britain, during the nineteenth century, witnessed profound social change as industrialisation saw machines and new processes replace traditional agricultural jobs. This led to a great migration of rural communities leaving their shires and villages to move into the towns and cities in search of work. London saw a huge influx of this migration that saw its population increase from 1 million in 1801 to 2.5 million in

⁷ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p.642.

⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism* (London: James Fraser, 1840), Internet Archive, (<https://archive.org/stream/chartism02carlgoog#page/n7/mode/2up>), p. 1.

⁹ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.124.

¹⁰ Letter to A.H. Layard, April 10th, 1855, Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, and Nina Burgis, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens, Volume Seven, 1853-1855* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 586.

1851.¹¹ The infrastructure of the towns and cities, however, remained the same during this increased urbanisation, and this in turn led to overcrowding, slums and poor sanitation as a result of the urban centres being unprepared and lacking the will, resources and infrastructure needed to cope with such an influx.¹² The overcrowding, as indicated by one survey of the 1840s, saw an area of St Giles, a district of London, with 2,850 people crowded into ‘just 95 small and decrepit houses’, with families of seven or eight people living in a single room.¹³ This exponential growth in urbanisation is portrayed in Dickens’s novels; in *Oliver Twist*: ‘the thickest of the crowd’,¹⁴ and ‘a roar of sound and bustle’;¹⁵ in *Bleak House*: ‘the roar and jar of many vehicles, many feet, many voices’;¹⁶ *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841): ‘the crowd grew thicker and more noisy’;¹⁷ and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839): ‘Streams of people apparently without end poured on and on’.¹⁸ It is also portrayed in other cultural works, such as Gustave Doré’s *A City Thoroughfare, London: A Pilgrimage* (1872) (Appendix 1), as well as in the work of contemporary social reformers; and statistics on population growth and the examples of other works add to the authenticity of Dickens’s portrayal of this tumultuous social upheaval. In *Bleak House* Dickens portrays the economic migration of people moving into towns and cities through the brickmakers walking twenty three miles looking for work, but finding none when they arrive.¹⁹ Their situation was endemic of hundreds of thousands who came to the towns and cities looking for work but found none and subsequently fell into a life of destitution, drink and vice. Dickens, in highlighting this social change, also

¹¹ Paul Schlicke, ed., *Oxford Reader’s Companion to Bleak House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 347.

¹² Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 382.

¹³ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 381.

¹⁴ *Oliver Twist*, p. 164.

¹⁵ *Oliver Twist*, p. 163.

¹⁶ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 690.

¹⁷ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 209.

¹⁸ Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 408.

¹⁹ *Bleak House*, p. 332.

emphasised the contrast of conflicting life styles, with London dirty, filthy, and full of smoke and fog, while the country is relatively clean in comparison. In *Oliver Twist*, Oliver, arriving in London, had never seen a ‘dirtier’ more ‘wretched place’,²⁰ even at night. Esther Summerson, in *Bleak House*, has a similar first impression, while Oliver, later on, is struck by how clean the country poor were in comparison to urban poor, ‘so neat and clean’.²¹ This has the effect of emphasising the dirt and filth of urban poverty by contrasting it against an English idyll that may or may not be true. It follows the nineteenth-century tradition of looking back to a golden age of English idealism when times were hard. Conversely, In *Bleak House*, Dickens describes the country poor in a different light. Here their poverty is just as desperate and despairing as those of urban areas.²² In doing so, Dickens is highlighting that severe poverty and the Condition of England question was a national phenomenon that existed all over the country and not just in the major metropolitan areas. He thereby gives added urgency to calls for a national solution through social reform.

The relationship between town and country, and the huge social change it reflects, is brilliantly portrayed in the merging and coming together of livestock, thieves and vagabonds in Dickens’s depiction of Smithfield Market in *Oliver Twist*,²³ and the extent to which the countryside encroached into the city can be seen by the number of animals in the streets and parks, as illustrated in Gustave Doré’s *Under the Trees—Regent’s Park* (1872) (Appendix 2). Liza Picard in *Victorian London: The Life of a City 1840-1870* describes how cows were kept in cramped cowsheds all over the city.²⁴ She also describes how 40,000 tons of cow, pig and sheep dung were deposited on London’s streets every year whilst walking to and from the market, with

²⁰ *Oliver Twist*, p. 59.

²¹ *Oliver Twist*, p. 254.

²² *Bleak House*, p. 118.

²³ *Oliver Twist*, p. 164.

²⁴ Liza Picard, *Victorian London: The Life of a City 1840-1870* (London: Orion Books, 2006), p. 3

37,000 tons of horse manure, all mixed with human excrement and washing around London's streets, creating the Great Stink (1858) and the perfect breeding ground for disease.²⁵

Dickens, in depicting poverty, describes its degrading inhumanity. In *Oliver Twist* he describes how Nancy had lost the 'many, many traces' of humanity because of her wasted life since childhood.²⁶ Her 'gleam of womanly feeling',²⁷ however, enables her to reconnect with humanity and do the right thing by Oliver. Elsewhere Dickens highlights this inhumanity by comparing the poor to 'rats',²⁸ 'dogs',²⁹ 'cattle',³⁰ and 'a race apart'.³¹ This emphasises how poverty and destitution dehumanises the poor, but also, paradoxically, reinforces their 'other' status. It highlights their sub-species status and reinforces, instead of dispelling, their demonisation. Such demonising of the poor was a common occurrence in the nineteenth century, with Dr Simon, ironically, a worker for public health reform, seeing them as 'swarms [...] who have yet to learn that human beings should dwell differently from cattle' and 'swarms to whom personal cleanliness is utterly unknown'.³² The Brickmaker, in *Bleak House*, would no doubt put up a passionate defence against this view: '[l]ook at the water. Smell it! That's wot we drinks. How do you like it[?]',³³ and would no doubt wonder how long it would take Dr Simon to become part of the swarm if his advantages and life opportunities had been equal to that of the poor. Dickens also, as well as using contradictory imagery to describe the poor, confirms his own disassociation from those he champions, often within the same

²⁵ Liza Picard, *Victorian London: The Life of a City 1840-1870*, p. 3.

²⁶ *Oliver Twist*, p. 322.

²⁷ *Oliver Twist*, p. 322.

²⁸ *Oliver Twist*, p. 38.

²⁹ *Bleak House*, p. 238.

³⁰ *Bleak House*, p. 237.

³¹ *Little Dorrit*, p. 98.

³² Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 382.

³³ *Bleak House*, p. 121.

novel. In *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) he occasionally interrupts proceedings to address the ruling class—the Lords and Gentlemen—, and in describing Betty Higden’s pride, despite her ordeal, he tells them that she is as ‘composed as our own faces, and almost as dignified’.³⁴ In this example he is showing the upper classes that the poor can rise to be honourable and decent citizens, like Lizzie Hexam—there are always exceptions, though, with characters like Roger Riderhood—, but at the same time he is firmly associating himself with their class and not Betty Higden’s. Dickens here, though, I would contend, is arguing for meritocracy. In his work’s championing of the poor and campaigning for social reform he is not arguing for blanket equality and redistribution of wealth, he is arguing for equality of opportunity, with poverty eventually being eradicated, or greatly reduced, through universal education and more jobs being created as a result. Then, more people, through increased social mobility, merit, talent, and hard work, can rise up through society, perhaps arriving at his own status and beyond. Until then they are not equal, even with social reform. His contradictory use of animal imagery, I would also contend, reflects the accuracy, and honesty, of his social observation: this is what the poor, and all human beings, are reduced to when society and opportunity is so unfairly weighted against them, and given their lot, with nothing to hope for but a lifetime of grinding poverty, we would all take on the appearance of rats, dogs, savages, and a race apart.

In championing the poor Dickens was highly critical of the New Poor Law (1834) and the increased use of workhouses. The law was intended to end out-door relief, that had become costly, and provide only indoor relief in the workhouses. Parishes were formed into unions with each union being required to build a workhouse for its poor. The workhouses were deliberately intended to be severe in

³⁴ Charles, Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 203.

order to act as a deterrent and to encourage the poor to find work instead of relief. They were also designed to keep the poor and the destitute off the streets, and so out of mind. Work, though, as we have seen, was scarce as industrialisation and steam-powered machinery replaced traditional jobs done by hand, and with millions of people migrating into towns and cities, huge numbers ended up in slums and the workhouses, with two million people living in workhouses in 1843,³⁵ a statistic Carlyle thought a scandal and a ‘great injustice’ at a time when the country had ‘more riches than any nation ever had before’.³⁶ What work was to be had was also seasonal, as Dickens alludes to in *Bleak House*: ‘There’s no work down with us at present.’³⁷ Other contemporary social writers also described the seasonal, temporary nature of work. Elizabeth Gaskell, who conducted her own extensive research, in *Mary Barton*, describes factory workers in Manchester selling all their belongings and furniture when laid-off after orders fell in order to stave off hunger.³⁸ She describes how people wanted to work and not accept handouts: ‘D—n their charity [...] I want work’.³⁹ Dickens also conveys the pride of the poor in not accepting relief and wanting to get their ‘own bread by [their] own labour’.⁴⁰ Mr Plornish, in *Little Dorrit*, is another example of honest, hardworking poor, who find work difficult to come by. Families who could no longer pay their rent, despite the help from family friends and neighbours, as depicted in *Bleeding Heart Yard*, would have no option but to go to the workhouse to feed their children, after which they were often separated from them.⁴¹ Low pay, seasonal work, and unscrupulous landlords like Mr Casby meant the workhouse was a very real threat. Casby disguises his exploitation through false

³⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1931), p. 1.

³⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, p. 1.

³⁷ *Bleak House*, p. 332.

³⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 112.

³⁹ *Mary Barton*, p. 112.

⁴⁰ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 376.

⁴¹ Liza Picard, *Victorian London: The Life of a City 1840-1870*, p. 93.

paternalism, and Dickens here could easily be using Casby, the benevolent patriarch, as a symbol of the state: he treats the poor like children, exploits them, pretends to have their best interest at heart, is self-important, and is only interested in personal self-aggrandisement.⁴² Sickness also terrified the working poor, as being sick and unable to work meant no pay and a slide into pauperism and eventually the workhouse. These portrayals of the poor wanting work but having no work counters the claims by workhouse supporters of the time that the poor were lazy and preferred to claim out-door relief rather than work; and Dickens and his contemporaries would argue that squalor, filth, degrading behaviour, vice and alcoholism were a result of no work and insecure seasonal work rather than any inherent, predetermined characteristic of the poor. Dickens alludes to this in *Hard Times* by saying that society would have found more favour for the working poor if Providence had not seen fit to make them what they are. They are born with hands and stomachs like the 'lower creatures of the seashore' and therefore that is what they are.⁴³ They work with their hands and eat; a crab is a crab. This allows society not to take responsibility, or feel responsible, for the millions of poor and working poor in Britain, because Providence decrees it. Providence, Dickens suggests, is used by society to prop up its hierarchical structure and wealth and power retention, thereby increasing inequality and poverty as a result, to the detriment and shame of the nation. The lack of workers' rights, in paying them a decent wage and keeping them in work, reflects a society that adheres to the strict laws of supply and demand and protects business profit above the protection and prevention, through regulation, of the working poor falling into destitution. It enabled factory owners to lay-off workers when orders were low in order to keep huge profits when orders were high, rather than use those profits to keep

⁴² Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 148.

⁴³ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 66.

the poor labourers, already on low pay, in their jobs and out of misery, degrading poverty, and the workhouse. Dickens, in *Hard Times*, alludes to the 'vast fortunes'⁴⁴ to be made by factory owners on the low pay of the workers, and the lack of workers' rights, insecure seasonal work, low pay, and the threat of the workhouse led to the creation of the Chartist movement.

The hardship of the workhouses is reflected in *Oliver Twist*, *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Dickens describes people starving to death: 'They starved her!'⁴⁵ Dickens here is suggesting that the workhouse, the beadle and the Board of Governors starved her. He is also suggesting society at large starved her through apathy and indifference. They all starved her. This reflects the numerous scandals and abuses that were exposed at the time. At Andover in Hampshire in 1845 the poor, half starved, were found to be eating the rotten flesh and marrow off the bones of animals.⁴⁶ Dickens also referred to a scandal in 'What is Sensational?' in which two paupers died of starvation in workhouses in 1864 and 1865, and in both cases the official response—part of numerous incidents of cruelty and abuse highlighted by Norman Longmate in *The Workhouse* (2003)—was one of disbelief, accusations of sensationalism, apathy and indifference, and that 'all is well'.⁴⁷ Dickens depicts the number of deaths of the poor, in *Oliver Twist*, both in and out of the workhouses, by highlighting Mr Sowerberry's, the undertaker's, flourishing trade, and by indicating that the graves are full.⁴⁸ The rising cause of death is hinted as being malnutrition as the coffins are becoming 'narrower and more shallow than they used to be', as a result

⁴⁴ *Hard Times*, p. 155.

⁴⁵ *Oliver Twist*, p. 39.

⁴⁶ Norman Longmate, *The Workhouse* (London: Pimlico, 2003) p. 124.

⁴⁷ Charles Dickens, 'What is Sensational?', *All the Year Round*, 2/3/1867, Vol. XVII, No. 410, *Dickens Journals Online* (<http://www.djo.org.uk/all-the-year-round/volume-xvii/page-221.html>)

⁴⁸ *Oliver Twist*, p. 41.

of the 'new system of feeding' that has come in.⁴⁹ 'You'll make your fortune, Mr Sowerberry', observes Mr Bumble with much amusement, indicative of the disdain of the poor held by Poor Law officials whose role was the supervision of their welfare. When Oliver is presented before the Board of Governors before being admitted into the workhouse, they are astonished that he can find anything to cry about.⁵⁰ Dickens's portrayal here of Poor Law administrators is indicative of '[w]hat the poor are to the poor [...] little [is] known', despite these officials being tasked with administering the poor; and if this ignorance is present in Poor Law officials then its depth and degree in wider society and the upper classes would surely have been much greater. Dickens also conducted his own research into conditions in the workhouses through his article 'A Walk in a Workhouse' in *Household Words*. Here he describes people that are 'dangerously ill', dying, and 'all skeleton within'. He describes coffins piled up in the store below and a burnt child looking as if contemplating a future only of the workhouse and wondering if he was better off in one of the coffins instead. Yet he also finds that the children appear well and well looked after, an observation that suggests cruelty, abuse and ill-usage was not universal in all workhouses. Dickens then tempers this impression by stating that the best chance for the boys in getting 'aloft' in life would be to smash as many windows as possible, as the Middlesex House of Correction has better facilities for them to learn skills and a trade.⁵¹ Dickens's portrayal of the workhouses counters claims made at the time and by modern social historians that the workhouses were not so bad and that journalists tended to 'over-sensationalise them'.⁵² Ultimately, Dickens describes the workhouses as offering a grim choice to the poor of dying of starvation by a gradual process in the

⁴⁹ *Oliver Twist*, p. 26.

⁵⁰ *Oliver Twist*, p. 10.

⁵¹ Charles Dickens, 'A Walk in a Workhouse', *Household Words*, 25/5/1850, Vol. 1, No. 9, *Dickens Journals Online* (<http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-i/page-204.html>).

⁵² Liza Picard, *Victorian London: The Life of a City 1840-1870*, p. 93.

house, or by a quick one out of it.⁵³ He also indicates, through his portrayal of Betty Higden in *Our Mutual Friend*, that many of the deserving poor chose the latter in order to keep their pride and dignity, a point which politicians at the time refused to believe.⁵⁴ Subsequently, Dickens's portrayal of the workhouses and the Poor Law reflects an indifferent society that socially cleanses and ghettoises a vast socio-economic class of people instead of addressing the fundamental problems that result in the rise of the class in the first place.

Dickens also, in his portrayal of the workhouses, suggests how the poor became institutionalised, with some people spending virtually their whole lives in them. Mr Nandy, in *Little Dorrit*, we learn has been given 'special leave' to visit his family, and an elderly gentleman in 'A Walk in a Workhouse' complains that the frequency of being allowed to go outside is 'so seldom'.⁵⁵ This erosion of liberty of the poor, and the juxtaposition of Mr Nandy—who's only crime is being poor—going to visit Mr Dorrit—who's only crime is being in debt—in the debtors' prison, having been given permission to leave the workhouse, is alarming. It showed a society that criminalised its poor, either through the workhouse or through the debtors' prison, as the poor were much more likely to fall into debt, often as a consequence of trying to feed their families, pay their rent, and, ultimately, stay out of the workhouse. Mr Nandy is old and decrepit, despite being younger than Mr Dorrit, and has become institutionalised; something Dickens describes in 'A Walk in a Workhouse' as a 'ghastly kind of contentment'.⁵⁶

⁵³ *Oliver Twist*, p. 10.

⁵⁴ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, postscript, September 1865, p. 799.

⁵⁵ Charles Dickens, 'A Walk in a Workhouse', (<http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-i/page-207.html>).

⁵⁶ Charles Dickens, 'A Walk in a Workhouse', (<http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-i/page-204.html>).

Dickens, in his work, reflected a society that criminalised its poor. He also highlighted the inequality of the poor within the law. Mr Dorrit, we learn, has served a twenty-three year prison sentence for debt, and that his debt is still outstanding. He has been removed from society and from the ability to work to pay his debt, while his lender receives no money if his family cannot afford to pay it. Mr Dorrit could also have easily spent the rest of his life in prison had the unlikely event of him coming into a vast fortune not materialised, even for a relatively small debt, and this was an accurate reflection of how the law was unfairly weighted against the poor.⁵⁷ In *Bleak House*, Jo, a poor orphan road-sweep, is prevented from giving evidence at Nemo's inquest because he cannot read or write even though he knows it is 'wicked to tell a lie'.⁵⁸ His life is spent constantly being harassed and told to move on, even though he has never done anything wrong.⁵⁹ Betty Higden, in *Our Mutual Friend*, ends up fleeing the threat of the workhouse like 'a hunted animal',⁶⁰ even though she wishes to end her days in honest, decent destitution, having never accepted charity from anyone. She is persecuted by the threat of being handed over to the Parish by the rogue, Roger Riderhood—an example of the undeserving, unredeemable poor. Dickens indicates the shameful discrimination shown towards the poor by the law makers and legal administrators by highlighting their often lower status than that of petty criminals: 'that the dishonest felon is, in respect of cleanliness, order, diet, and accommodation, better provided for, and taken care of, than the honest pauper.'⁶¹ This legal discrimination of the poor, through the Vagrancy Act (1824), the Poor Law and the workhouses, creates a social underclass that is distinct and removed from the rest

⁵⁷ *Little Dorrit*, p. 838n.

⁵⁸ *Bleak House*, p. 162.

⁵⁹ *Bleak House*, p. 669.

⁶⁰ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 500.

⁶¹ Charles Dickens, 'A Walk in a Workhouse', (<http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-i/page-205.html>).

of society. It creates permanent socio-economic checks, barriers and controls when written into law that forms part of Britain's national identity of the period, for Britain's response to poverty was to challenge it and persecute it into the prisons and workhouses and to clear it off the streets. The problem with this response was that increased inequality meant that poverty kept growing and returning. Sooner or later, Dickens hoped, the penny had to drop.

The workhouses in Victorian Britain, then, were greatly feared by the poor because of their cruelty and abuses, and their institutionalisation and loss of liberty. We see through Dickens's work that the fear was to such an extent that it became part of the poor's popular culture and folklore. This can be seen in stories and popular song of the time, such as *The Workhouse Boy*, about a boy being made into soup in a workhouse.⁶² An interesting point here is the mythologizing of the fear of the workhouse would quite possibly have been contributed to by Dickens's portrayal in *Oliver Twist* and then reflected through his later work, *Bleak House*, especially considering his and *Oliver Twist*'s popularity. This is not to say the fear of the workhouse was not real; it was very real. It is just a reflection of Dickens's medium: his novels in particular were ingrained and part of the culture they were exposing. With or without Dickens, though, the workhouses were real, and the scandals and fear of them was real too. The subject of the song—a boy—also reflects the effects of the Poor Law and the workhouses on children, and on the significant numbers of orphans and homeless children present on Britain's streets, expressed in *Oliver Twist* through the criminal underclass's awareness of easily being able to pick up a stray at Covent Garden.⁶³ Poverty, then, provides easy recruits into the world of criminality and further destabilises society. The waifs, part of Fagin's gang, recruited for their ease of

⁶² *Bleak House*, p. 158.

⁶³ *Oliver Twist*, p. 153.

control, pliability, and nimble surefootedness, pickpocket Mr Brownlow, and Bill Sykes attempts to burgle the wealthy Maylies; and the connection between poverty, criminality, and the wealthy is made. The corrosive effects of poverty on children is also emphasised through Oliver Twist being born in a workhouse and Little Dorrit in a debtors' prison.

Dickens through his work also emphasised how poverty did not exist in isolation, and how it was inextricably linked to all areas of society. He did this through connection; through disease that had its roots in poverty and through the spectra of social unrest. Dickens aimed to show that the ruling and upper classes could not remain aloof and detached from the problems and consequences of poverty, and in this vein hoped to persuade of the necessity of social reform. This can be seen through the cholera and typhoid epidemics throughout the mid-nineteenth century that killed tens of thousands of people. Both diseases were the result of horrendous sanitary conditions that saw open cesspools and raw sewage in the streets in London flowing into the Thames and contaminating drinking water. Dickens emphasised this connection in *Bleak House* through the 'east wind' (an indication of the theory of Miasma and disease being carried through bad air before water was discovered to be the source), and through the slums working their retribution, through the spreading of disease and contagion, on a society that had forsaken them.⁶⁴

In addition to connection through disease, Dickens warned of connection through social unrest. In *Hard Times*, and following on from the Chartist riots and demonstrations through the late 1830s and 1840s, Dickens warns that reality will take a 'wolfish turn, and make an end of you!' if the poor continue to face a bare

⁶⁴ *Bleak House*, p. 654.

existence.⁶⁵ Here he is talking directly to the middle and upper classes, emphasising Carlyle's view that 'inequality leads to the insecurity of all classes'.⁶⁶ Though Dickens is weary of political agitators and firebrands, and the ultimate threat of a national uprising, he supports the call for workers' rights and a decent wage, and criticises the Bounderbys (the new industrial bourgeois factory owners) and the ruling class for not recognising the moral middle ground between poverty and deprivation and 'a coach and six' with 'turtle soup and venison' and 'gold spoons'.⁶⁷ Ultimately, Dickens considered the Poor Law and the conditions and inequality that gave rise to poverty to such an extent in Britain during the period a national disgrace that shamed the country.⁶⁸ This shame we can see also travelled beyond Britain's shores with well-to-do American ladies in the American South during the civil war responding to British criticism of slavery by calling them hypocrites and reminding them of the shame of their own poverty.⁶⁹ Other foreign observers were shocked and 'deeply disturbed' by the 'widespread poverty and suffering', and viewed British poverty inexcusable 'not only because of the country's obvious riches but because it was juxtaposed with aristocratic opulence'.⁷⁰ Poverty, then, became inextricably linked to British national identity as viewed from other countries around the world.

Dickens's novels, in fictionalising the work of Engels, Mayhew and Chadwick, as well as portraying the extent of poverty as part of a collective national identity, also showed us the connection between the consequences of poverty and gross inequality—the slums, the cholera, death, disease and social unrest—and the

⁶⁵ *Hard Times*, p. 160.

⁶⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, p. 6.

⁶⁷ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, postscript, September 1865, p. 799.

⁶⁸ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, postscript, p. 799.

⁶⁹ Joseph Charles Parkinson, 'Slavery in England', 15/6/1867, *Dickens Journals Online* (<http://www.djo.org.uk/all-the-year-round/volume-xvii/page-585.html>)

⁷⁰ Daniel Kilbride, *Being American in Europe, 1750-1860* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013), p. 27.

rich and the ruling class. His work also revealed a connection between poverty itself, the causes of poverty, and wealth.

Chapter Two: Wealth

‘Life and death went hand in hand; wealth and poverty stood side by side; repletion and starvation laid them down together.’⁷¹ To Charles Dickens, wealth and poverty were inextricably linked. He viewed national wealth as being both the cause of poverty and the solution to it;⁷² and representations of wealth, and the power and influence that came with it, are present throughout his work. Like Dickens’s representation of poverty being fictionalised accounts of the work of social reformers like Engels, Chadwick and Mayhew, so Dickens’s representation of wealth can be seen to be fictionalised accounts of Thomas Carlyle’s concept, in *Past and Present* (1843), of Mammonism and greed, and the endless pursuit of riches above all else, and the corrupting, corrosive effect this has on the fabric of society. His novels reflect how the political philosophy of utilitarianism and self-interest creates a ‘mechanistic worldview’⁷³ that feeds Mammonism and exasperates inequality and stifles social reform. They show how this filters through society, from the top to the bottom: from Podsnappery and high society, to Barnacleism, corruption and government ineptitude; from financial speculation, fraud, and the miseries of debt, and the hallowed halls of chancery, to the slums of Tom-all-alone’s and Bleeding Heart Yard, the desire for wealth and riches spreads, corrupting all before it. Dickens portrays a society that cannibalises itself and feeds off the weak and the vulnerable; a vampire-like society that will ‘do anything lawful, for money’,⁷⁴ and of which all degrees of success and

⁷¹ *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 409.

⁷² Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire: Discourses of Class, Race and Colonialism in the Works of Charles Dickens* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), p. 82.

⁷³ Mark Cumming, ed., *The Carlyle Encyclopedia* (Cranbury: Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, 2004), p. 27.

⁷⁴ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 796.

contentment is measured against. He shows us how this infiltration and corrosion, of Mammonism in society, in turn, reflects British national identity of the period.

Depictions of wealth can be seen throughout Dickens's work. In *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) crowds of people stream pass shops filled with 'sparkling jewellery' and 'luxurious ornament[s]' of 'rich and glittering profusion'.⁷⁵ Dickens contrasts these images with scenes of great poverty, such as the slums of St Giles and Seven Dials, Saffron Hill, and Jacob's island, and uses the contrast to highlight the huge inequality gap between the rich and the poor in the nineteenth century. The contrast, though, is not an invention, as wealth and poverty existed side by side in London's streets. In *Bleak House*, Esther Summerson, upon first arriving in London, passes through the 'dirtiest and darkest streets' before passing suddenly, and abruptly, into quieter, more salubrious surroundings.⁷⁶ In *Little Dorrit* low dwellings go for huge rents because they are so close to 'Society'.⁷⁷ The close proximity between the rich and the poor, and how the most severely deprived came into virtually daily contact with the wealthy can be seen in William Hogarth's, *Four Times of Day - Noon* (1738) (Appendix 3). Here a wealthy family casually stroll through a scene of filth and debauchery. They look knowingly at each other as if their walk is a source of entertainment, like observing animals in a zoo. Their chubby young man-child, dressed in grown-ups' clothes and buckle shoes looks down bemused into the gutter, no doubt as streams of excrement flow past; and the church of St Giles can be seen in the background. This disdain and disregard for the poor by the rich is also reflected in Dickens's work, with Lizzie Hexam, in *Our Mutual Friend*, rejected by 'Society' as a 'horrid female waterman' whom it would be impossible to be 'graceful'.⁷⁸ 'Society',

⁷⁵ *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 408.

⁷⁶ *Bleak House*, p. 37

⁷⁷ *Little Dorrit*, p. 115.

⁷⁸ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 793.

we see, in Dickens's portrayal, is also prejudiced to those who have bettered themselves and risen out of poverty. The Boffins, for instance, are described as 'charmingly vulgar'.⁷⁹ Yet we also see that this disregard is not universal. In *Oliver Twist* Nancy tells Rose Maylie that 'if there was more like you, there would be fewer like me',⁸⁰ and both Mr Brownlow and Mrs Maylie take in poor orphans. In *Hard Times* Louisa Bounderby had 'scarcely thought' of separating the poor from a 'whole' into separate units 'than of separating the sea itself into its component drops'.⁸¹ This, as a result of her utilitarian upbringing, and John Harmon, in *Our Mutual Friend*, declares that being rich is not necessarily bad because it gives you 'a great power of doing good to others.'⁸² This sentence gets to the heart of Dickens's political belief. The 'great power' he refers to is the power and influence that comes with great wealth. Dickens was not a 'dangerous socialist'.⁸³ He did not believe in the redistribution of wealth or of the wealthy giving their money away to the poor. He believed in the wealthy using their power and influence to do good for society and the country as a whole rather than to benefit themselves. He believed in top-down social reform.

In agitating for social reform, Dickens's work reflects Thomas Carlyle's observations, in *Past and Present*, of a corrupt society based on Mammonism that leads to poverty, squalor, vice, and huge inequality. In *Past and Present* Carlyle talks of a cash-nexus,⁸⁴ and a society constructed around man's base appetites. He argues that man's soul is different from his stomach, and that society is built on profit and loss and material transactions at every human interaction; hence the deep misery and

⁷⁹ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 304.

⁸⁰ *Oliver Twist*, p. 322.

⁸¹ *Hard Times*, p. 155.

⁸² *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 664.

⁸³ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 165.

⁸⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, p. 194.

grinding poverty for the millions who cannot compete and are the losers in this rapacious world: for in this ultra, laissez-faire Merdle world there has to be losers in order for there to be winners, and for every winner there are untold Mr Nickleby losers. Dickens was one of the “millions” of Carlyle’s readers who looked to him for moral guidance,⁸⁵ at a time of huge social transition, severe poverty, squalor, filth, and industrial unrest, and Carlyle’s message and reflection of society in the nineteenth century is fictionalised and reflected in his work. The popularity of Carlyle’s work suggests it had real credence in accurately reflecting the problems of Victorian society, and his Scottish nationality, portrayal of Glasgow slums and Irish poor indicates a British dimension, and a reflection of British identity. Dickens’s portrayal of wealth and representations of national identity also shares a spiritual element to Carlyle’s in conveying the Christian, biblical message that ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of Heaven.’⁸⁶ We see representations of a society based on Mammonism and a cash nexus in Dickens’s work. In *Our Mutual Friend* Bella Wilfer is open and frank about her desire for wealth above all else: ‘I must have money’.⁸⁷ Here her eyes are opened to the power and influence that comes with wealth, and it is this she desires almost as much as the wealth itself. Later she acknowledges that her all-consuming desire for wealth and riches—a desire she recognises turned her into a ‘mercenary little wretch’—stemmed from seeing wealth all around her and the things it could ‘really do’.⁸⁸ The mercenary nature needed to succeed and move up in a cash-nexus world is corroborated by Mrs Merdle in *Little Dorrit* who claims that ‘Society is perhaps a

⁸⁵ Alan, Shelston, *Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 7.

⁸⁶ *Little Dorrit*, p. 382.

⁸⁷ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 317.

⁸⁸ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 317.

little mercenary you know, my dear'.⁸⁹ Bella Wilfer, in contrast, indicates that when she only knew poverty she 'grumbled but didn't mind very much'.⁹⁰ Later she declares that her greed for wealth has corroded her physically by giving her wrinkles.⁹¹ Dickens then is hinting that the greed and desire for wealth in society corrupts physically as well as morally and spiritually. It defiles beauty in the individual and in society, destroying innocence and compassion, turning souls and personalities to 'marble'.⁹² Here Bella is referring to Mr Boffin who is putting on an act in collusion with John Harmon to see whether Bella can love him without money, but it is indicative of society that Bella so readily believes this portrayal and that Mr Boffin and John Harmon believed that she would. Bella eventually rejects a life of wealth and 'money, money, money' and begs to be made poor again, thus saving herself from moral and spiritual damnation.⁹³ Little Dorrit too rejects wealth and expresses a romanticised view of the honest, decent struggle of poverty when she yearns to return to her old life at Marshalsea to escape the mercenary ugliness and superficiality of wealth and high society: 'So dearly, do I love the scene of my poverty and your kindness.'⁹⁴ Dickens is portraying a romantic view of honest, decent poverty to provide a contrast against the immoral, dishonest, and ugly superficiality of the 'Society' and wealth the Dorrit's have unexpectedly arrived at; yet the wish is undesirable and implausible given the stark realities of severe poverty witnessed at the time of Dickens's writing. It is an example of Dickens exaggerating the purity of poverty in order to provide a starker contrast with the self-serving immorality of wealth. This raises the question of whether his portrayals of the rich were also

⁸⁹ *Little Dorrit*, p. 381.

⁹⁰ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 317.

⁹¹ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 453.

⁹² *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 586.

⁹³ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 583.

⁹⁴ *Little Dorrit*, p. 532.

exaggerated; yet scenes of severe poverty and destitution remained, as did huge disparities between the rich and the poor.

The corrupting nature of wealth and its damaging effect on society is also reflected in Dickens's portrayal of the rich and powerful. Veneering, in *Our Mutual Friend*—a man whose very name alludes superficiality—, is described as 'sly, mysterious, filmy',⁹⁵ with a hidden countenance as awful as his outer persona is revered. While Merdle in *Little Dorrit* is a meek, disinterested individual who is terrified of his Chief Butler, lest he should see through his charade. His wife, meanwhile, is a trophy to 'hang jewels upon'.⁹⁶ Mr Merdle is an enigma; nobody knows what his business is, except that it is to 'coin money'.⁹⁷ He is worshipped because he is immensely rich,⁹⁸ and Mr Veneering's oldest friends are people he has only just met; a reflection of 'Society' being a pretence that cares about nothing except money.⁹⁹ Money is what unites and unifies them,¹⁰⁰ and the details of where it comes from is not important. Appearance and respectability, or the appearance of respectability, is everything,¹⁰¹ as Mr Dorrit reflects as he becomes more conceited having come into wealth. This he thinks is right and proper and is a reflection of the society he saw around him before becoming wealthy.

Merdle and Veneering are both architects of hugely damaging financial crashes as a result of financial speculation. Dickens calls financial speculation 'Gaming' and a 'science',¹⁰² purposely impenetrable and almost impossible to understand (a point that resonates today). He calls it a plague upon society,¹⁰³ similar

⁹⁵ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 21.

⁹⁶ *Little Dorrit*, p. 244.

⁹⁷ *Little Dorrit*, p. 382.

⁹⁸ *Little Dorrit*, p. 533.

⁹⁹ *Little Dorrit*, p. 385.

¹⁰⁰ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 22.

¹⁰¹ *Little Dorrit*, p. 439.

¹⁰² *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 612.

¹⁰³ *Little Dorrit*, p. 547.

to cholera that infects every aspect and sends all trades and livelihoods to ruin. We see this in *Little Dorrit* with the Dorrits, Mr Pancks and Arthur Clennam being ruined after having succumbed to Merdle's magical allure and reputation. His fraudulent activities blight every profession and trade, with old people cast into the workhouse and women and children having their whole futures desolated.¹⁰⁴ Dickens calls Merdle the 'greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that ever cheated the gallows',¹⁰⁵ and his fraudulent infection even seeps down and infects the poor in Bleeding Heart Yard.¹⁰⁶ Dickens based his frauds and financial crashes on the real scandals of 'the Railway-share epoch', 'a certain Irish bank' and the 'late Directors of a Royal British Bank' in the 1840s and 1850s;¹⁰⁷ and through his portrayals of the scandals, Dickens is making a direct link between wealth and poverty, and how a society based on Mammonism and greed at the very top causes, exasperates and maintains its most severely deprived at the bottom. The scandals, we see, were also the result of ultra-laissez faire political economy—a political Mammonism that reflected, and reinforced social Mammonism—in the non-regulatory carte blanche given to the city, banks and financial institutions at the time. This can be seen in limited liability only being established in 1855 and company law being in its infancy.¹⁰⁸ The concept of 'society', in the sense of everybody contributing to its greater good and the good of the country as a whole, from a utilitarian perspective, can also be seen to have been an anathema, with fewer than half-a-million people paying tax in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ *Little Dorrit*, p. 680.

¹⁰⁵ *Little Dorrit*, p. 680.

¹⁰⁶ *Little Dorrit*, p. 548.

¹⁰⁷ *Little Dorrit*, Preface, p. 5 & 844n.

¹⁰⁸ Norman Russel, *The Novelist and the Mammon: Literary Responses to the World of Commerce in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 23n.

¹⁰⁹ 'A short history of income tax', *The Independent on Sunday*, Sunday 15 October 1995, (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/a-short-history-of-income-tax-1577708.html>)

Dickens calls the speculative, financial institutions of the city ‘money-mills’,¹¹⁰ thereby indicating how the endless pursuit of money and wealth had become industrialised and an industrial process, and, in the same coinage, alluding and contrasting this against the common staple of food production: flour mills, food, staple industries that provide for the basic needs of the people; good, honest, essential production. The phrase also evokes a press and the first mass printing of paper banknotes in 1853,¹¹¹ with this having the effect of making money almost ethereal, both real and illusory, and in how in this transient state it was more easily lost.¹¹² In portraying financial speculation and the money-mills, and how the voracious pursuit of wealth plagues society, Dickens contrasts this with good businesses and honest trades. In *Little Dorrit*, the Plornishes are business minded, with Mr Plornish a plasterer and honest tradesman, and Mrs Plornish a shop owner providing for her poor local community, to which the only problem besetting her very steady business is the lack of credit; or of her giving to much of it.¹¹³ Hence in a Mammon society she does not have the ruthlessness to succeed. Her desire for wealth and riches at all costs is not strong enough. Daniel Doyce in *Little Dorrit* also represents one of Dickens’s good businesses. He is a smith and an engineer who devotes twelve years of his life to an invention of ‘great importance to his country and fellow creatures’.¹¹⁴ Dickens here contrasts the good business of creating, making and inventing something that is to the benefit and progress of society against the bad business of financial speculation that is to its detriment. Dickens’s ideal of a moral, noble capitalist system is conveyed in his

¹¹⁰ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 589.

¹¹¹ *A Brief History of Banknotes*, The Bank of England
<http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/banknotes/Pages/about/history.aspx>

¹¹² Philip Stevick, ‘Money and Fiction: Literary Realism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries, and: Disease and the Novel, 1880-1960 (review)’, *Project Muse*
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mfs/summary/v031/31.4.stevick.html>

¹¹³ *Little Dorrit*, p. 551.

¹¹⁴ *Little Dorrit*, p. 124.

depiction of the The Cheeryble Brothers in *Nicholas Nickleby*. The brothers, successful merchants, remember their roots and rise from poverty in helping those in need and undertaking charity work. They have a ‘noble nature’, an ‘unbound benevolence’ and a ‘singleness of heart’.¹¹⁵ They also help Nicholas and foil the schemes of Ralph Nickleby, a man who cares only about money and considers riches to be the ‘only true source of happiness and power’, and that it is ‘lawful and just to compass their acquisition by all means short of felony’.¹¹⁶ Nicholas’s father also was ruined by the ‘game’ of financial speculation in which his unseen cards ended in bad luck: ‘A mania prevailed, a bubble burst, four stock-brokers took villa residences at Florence, four hundred nobodies were ruined, and among them Mr Nickleby.’¹¹⁷ Again we see that in a society based on Mammonism there are a small number of people who become rich on the backs of hundreds of others’ misery and ruin. Dickens also contrasts the good, noble business of the Cheeryble Brothers with those of a profit and loss-driven economy. The Cheeryble Brothers were supposedly based on William and Daniel Grant whom Dickens met in Manchester.¹¹⁸ The Grants were successful calico printers and probably the Cheeryble Brothers referred to by Dickens in his preface to the novel.¹¹⁹ The Grants also met a Scottish engineer and inventor called James Nasmyth whom they helped set up a small business; and Nasmyth bears a remarkable resemblance to Daniel Doyce: both were mechanical engineers and inventors, with Nasmyth going on to invent the steam hammer. Dickens’s belief in an economy and a society built around creators and manufacturers and honest noble businessmen, instead of Mammonism and the pursuit of riches, is reflective of

¹¹⁵ *Nicholas Nickleby*, Preface, p. lvi.

¹¹⁶ *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 3.

¹¹⁷ *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 5.

¹¹⁸ Arthur Humphreys, ‘The Cheeryble Brothers’, *The Dickensian*, Vol. 1, No. 4, April 1905, *Internet Archive* (<https://archive.org/stream/dickensianvolum00englgoog#page/n100/mode/2up>), p. 102.

¹¹⁹ Norman Russel, *The Novelist and the Mammon: Literary Responses to the World of Commerce in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 193.

Carlyle's 'Captains of Industry' in *Past and Present*, and Rouncewell, the ironworker in *Bleak House*, also embodies these qualities. He also reflects Dickens's belief in meritocracy and people working hard to progress and be successful in society. The resistance Rouncewell receives from Sir Leicester also reflects the resistance of the aristocracy and the upper classes to upward social mobility, fearing that the floodgates would open.¹²⁰ This reflects a changing society and the emergence of a new middle class of industrial capitalists such as Josiah Bounderby in *Hard Times*. Dickens himself rose from poverty and a blacking factory to wealthy middle-class status, and he believed in equality for all from birth: 'I should not be punished for birth, nor a queen rewarded for it'.¹²¹ His belief in meritocracy was also conveyed in his journalism in *All the Year Round*'s 'Money or Merit' (1860). The rise of a new middle class, as result of a changing society, and the obstruction and resistance received from the upper classes can be seen in characters existing between both worlds. Meagles, in *Little Dorrit*, to use Benjamin Disraeli's terminology, stands between both nations:¹²² on the one hand he champions Doyce and his invention, and is indignant by the inertia of the Circumlocution Office for not granting him a patent for the public good, whilst on the other he covets Barnacle wealth, power and privilege¹²³ and admonishes Doyce as a genius but no man of business.¹²⁴ Doyce is too nice to be a businessman and Meagles' recognition of this reflects a ruthless utilitarian, self-interest culture at the heart of nineteenth-century business practices.

Dickens's portrayal of wealth and its corrosive effect on society also takes the form of criticism of hereditary privilege and power entrenchment. In *Little Dorrit* the

¹²⁰ *Bleak House*, p. 421.

¹²¹ *Bleak House*, p. 543.

¹²² Benjamin Disraeli in *Sybil* describes as the inequality gap between the rich and poor as 'Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy', Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 65-66.

¹²³ *Little Dorrit*, p. 204.

¹²⁴ *Little Dorrit*, p. 191.

honest, hardworking Doyce is thwarted at every turn by government inertia, ineptitude, nepotism, and the Barnacle-encrusted Circumlocution Office. It is a political class that is resistant to all change, whether its social reform or industrial patents in the public good. His 'HOW NOT TO DO IT'¹²⁵ portrayal of this political, self-centred intransigence supports Carlyle's own 'Donothingism in practice and saynothingism in speech' in *Past and Present*.¹²⁶ It reflects his deep despondence and hourly strengthened belief that the country's 'political aristocracy' and 'tuft-hunting' is 'the death of England',¹²⁷ and this could lead to Britannia herself looking for lodgings in Bleeding Heart Yard some 'ugly day or other' if she 'over-did the Circumlocution Office'.¹²⁸ Dickens highlights government bureaucracy, inertia and 'donothingism' in *Household Words* 'Red Tape' (1851) and 'Nobody, Somebody, Everybody' (1856). He also highlights government responses that 'All is well' in *All the Year Round*'s 'What is Sensational?' (1867), responding to government criticism of sensationalism in reporting on the conditions of the workhouses in 1860.¹²⁹ Dickens, in *Little Dorrit*, portrays the ruling class as unpatriotic in putting itself before the welfare of the nation. This he emphasises, along with the ruling class's *raison d'être* of keeping and maintaining power, wealth and influence, in his barnacle ship-of-state metaphor with the Barnacle dynasty knowing its primary function is to stick to the 'national ship as long as they [can]' and that if the 'ship [goes] down with them [...] sticking to it', then 'that [is] the ship's look out, and not theirs'.¹³⁰ Dickens reflects on the national ship almost going down in the Crimean war (1853-56), and his depictions of Barnacleism, the Circumlocution Office and government ineptitude are a

¹²⁵ *Little Dorrit*, p. 110.

¹²⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, p. 145.

¹²⁷ Stephen Wall, ed., *Little Dorrit*, Introduction (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p.xv.

¹²⁸ *Little Dorrit*, p. 128.

¹²⁹ *The unseen Charles Dickens*, 'The Big Read', *The Independent*, Tuesday 14 July 2015, p. 33.

¹³⁰ *Little Dorrit*, p. 126.

response to this.¹³¹ The relationship between wealth and power and the poor was also highlighted in the government dropping the Reform Bill as war broke out, and Dickens talked of his dismay at the Patriot Fund (a charitable body providing assistance to widows and orphans during the war) at a time when more people were dying in London of cholera than in the whole war.¹³² To Dickens, and to Carlyle, the Barnacles and ruling class were neglecting poverty to pursue riches at home and glory abroad. Dickens articulated this personification and identity of the English ruling class by observing that it is ‘not the custom in England to confer titles on men distinguished by peaceful services’,¹³³ and this was probably not so outlandish a suggestion of British society at the time, when considering that to the aristocratic ruling class, at a time when tens of thousands were dying of outbreaks of cholera and typhoid fever in abject poverty each year as a result of horrendous scenes of deprivation: ‘All is well’.

In conveying how wealth corrupted society from top to bottom to the detriment of all, Dickens also sought to convey the political belief and ideology that supported and sustained Mammonism as a creed. Utilitarianism and political economy—the belief that all human behaviour is motivated by self-interest to the extent that it is a universal law—was central to political thought in the mid-nineteenth century, and Dickens conveyed representations of this belief in his work. Carlyle was a staunch opponent and considered utilitarianism a ‘mechanistic worldview’ that reduced ‘virtue to an arithmetical calculation’.¹³⁴ He considered it a utility that reduced virtue to profit and loss¹³⁵ and a ‘beggarlier’ that created poverty and

¹³¹ Mamie Dickens, Georgina Hogarth, *The Letters of Charles Dickens 1833-1870* (London: MacMillan and Co, 1893). Captain Morgan, 1855, p. 383.

¹³² Letter to Mrs Watson, Nov 1st, 1854, Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, and Nina Burgis, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens, Volume Seven, 1853-1855* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 454)

¹³³ *Bleak House*, P. 526.

¹³⁴ Mark Cumming, ed., *The Carlyle Encyclopedia* (Cranbury: Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, 2004), p. 27.

¹³⁵ Mark Cumming, ed., *The Carlyle Encyclopedia*, p. 27.

beggars.¹³⁶ Dickens concurred and conveyed representations in his novels. He also depicted how this belief was nurtured, and how utilitarian upbringing results in unscrupulous characters. In *Hard Times* Dickens links a ruthlessness of his characters to that of the principles of utilitarianism and political economy, and in particular in how these philosophies were applied to education. Bitzer, we learn, after his 'Facts', 'nothing but facts' upbringing develops a mind that was so 'exactly regulated' that it had 'no affections or passions', of which all the proceedings were of the 'coldest calculation'.¹³⁷ Mr Sparsit, as a result of her own high society life, finds these characteristics 'clear-headed', 'cautious' and 'prudent' and considers him 'safe to rise in the world'.¹³⁸ Bitzer, having ruthlessly cast his mother into the workhouse, explains how his only reasonable transaction in any commodity would be to buy it as cheaply as possible and sell it for as much as possible, and that to the philosophers of utilitarianism, this comprised the 'whole duty of man – not a part of man's duty, but the whole.'¹³⁹ Dickens here is making clear allusions to the political class and links utilitarian upbringing to the corruption of wealth and Mammonism in society. He again alludes to the wider economy and the political class by calling him an 'excellent young economist'.¹⁴⁰ This economic utilitarianism is also reminiscent of the financial genius in *Our Mutual Friend*, a character with more than a hint of large-scale fraud and insider trading about him, who declares, almost as a mantra, that '[a] man may do anything lawful, for money';¹⁴¹ and we see the damaging economic consequences of utilitarian, laissez-faire self-interest in the fall of the Merdles in *Little Dorrit* and the Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend*. Dickens also suggests the same philosophy being

¹³⁶ Mark Cumming, ed., *The Carlyle Encyclopedia*, p. 28.

¹³⁷ *Hard Times*, p. 116.

¹³⁸ *Hard Times*, p. 116.

¹³⁹ *Hard Times*, p. 116.

¹⁴⁰ *Hard Times*, p. 116.

¹⁴¹ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 796.

behind the New Poor Law (1834) in describing Bitzer as being weak, in utilitarian terms, for giving his mother a present of tea in the workhouse once a year, because gifts tend to ‘pauperise the recipient’¹⁴² Dickens also strengthens the link between the self-interest of society and utilitarianism in schooling by juxtaposing the language of Mr Gradgrind’s educational philosophy in Bitzer’s observation that poor workers informing on each other to improve their livelihoods, either by money or goodwill, should be the first consideration of any ‘rational creature’.¹⁴³ The link of utilitarian education and its damaging effect to society is also present in others works. In *Our Mutual Friend* Bradley Headstone becomes depraved and murderous because he is unable to ground his passion because of his mechanical upbringing. ‘I don’t like that’ he says, surprising Charlie Hexam with his so ‘sudden and decided and emotional [...] objection’, when hearing of Lizzie Hexam’s penchant of evoking fancy while staring into the fire.¹⁴⁴ He has had no release and so loses grip of reality. In *Hard Times* Tom Gradgrind, ‘spitefully gritting his teeth’, expresses his desire to blow up all facts and figures and the people who found them out. He declares his intention to take revenge and enjoy himself and recompense himself for the way in which he has been brought up.¹⁴⁵ Charlie Hexum, in *Our Mutual Friend*, becomes selfish and only cares about his own prospects and reputation under the tutorage of Headstone;¹⁴⁶ and in this sense, Gaffer Hexum’s, at first glance, destructive distrust and suspicion of education is justified because of the character of people it produces. Dickens’s portrayal, then, of utilitarianism in education feeding and supporting utilitarianism in society has consequences for social reform and for the education of the poor, because

¹⁴² *Hard Times*, p. 116.

¹⁴³ *Hard Times*, p. 118.

¹⁴⁴ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 230.

¹⁴⁵ *Hard Times*, p. 55.

¹⁴⁶ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 694.

educating the poor is ultimately not in ‘Society’s’ self-interest, because it would open the ‘floodgates’.¹⁴⁷

The social results of utilitarianism and political economy, then, as reflected in Dickens’s work, is an unregulated, uncompassionate, rapacious society that preys on itself. In *Bleak House*, the impression of the strong preying on the weak—of society cannibalising itself—can be seen throughout. Women we learn, driven by despair, hunger and deprivation, commoditise their bodies and sell their hair.¹⁴⁸ Lawyers and solicitors, dressed like undertakers with an air of death, feast like vampires¹⁴⁹ and man-eaters¹⁵⁰ on the uninitiated and those seeking their help and expertise; legal representatives, instead of honestly assessing and working towards a client’s attainment of justice, look ‘devouringly’ to see what they can consume;¹⁵¹ the Chancery, that ‘most pestilent of hoary sinners’,¹⁵² in its purposefully foggy and opaque systems and procedures of truth, ‘keep their sheep [the populous] in the fold by hook or by crook until they have shorn [fleeced] them exceedingly close’;¹⁵³ and nefarious shadowy figures ‘treasure up’ secrets to trade for power, influence and wealth.¹⁵⁴ Dickens makes this predatory allusion to the core case of the novel, with *Jarndyce vs Jarndyce* being consumed as if by vultures by the legal system. At the end all that is left is the bones, and there is no legal interest now the flesh (money) has gone. The case is immediately discarded, and the victims of chancery can be found in ‘in every shire’, ‘every madhouse’ and ‘every churchyard’.¹⁵⁵ It is a bleak vision of a society corrupted and infected by utilitarianism and Mammonism. Dickens also shows

¹⁴⁷ *Bleak House*, p. 600.

¹⁴⁸ *Bleak House*, p. 63.

¹⁴⁹ *Bleak House*, p. 854.

¹⁵⁰ *Bleak House*, p. 575.

¹⁵¹ *Bleak House*, p. 901.

¹⁵² *Bleak House*, p. 12.

¹⁵³ *Bleak House*, p. 691.

¹⁵⁴ *Bleak House*, p. 423.

¹⁵⁵ Stephen Wall, ed., *Little Dorrit*, Introduction (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p.xvii.

how these characteristics have filtered down to smaller scale money lenders. Dickens has personal experience here with his father having been imprisoned at Marshalsea for debt.¹⁵⁶ In this portrayal he describes how unregulated money lenders like the Smallweeds in *Bleak House* and Daniel Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop* prey on the poor and the desperate, spinning ‘webs to catch unwary flies’ before retiring into holes until they are entrapped.¹⁵⁷ Dickens links these unscrupulous activities to utilitarianism. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Ralph Nickleby, ‘with a show of great reason’ realises that the most money can be made for shorter, higher term interest loans, as the borrower is most likely to be in ‘great extremity’.¹⁵⁸ Dickens then links this utilitarian modus operandi to the rich and wealthy by saying that capitalists large and small proceed ‘on just the same principle in all their transactions’.¹⁵⁹ The real Cheeryble brothers, in contrast, perhaps displaying Dickens’s ideal of the relationship between capitalism and labour, offered a credit to James Nasmyth for the start-up of his engineering business of five hundred pounds at three percent with no security whenever it was needed.¹⁶⁰ It is an example of the benevolent capitalism reflected in Dickens’s work. Individual responsibility and living within your means, though, must be a factor in considering the role of money lenders in Victorian society, and Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield* (1850) is a good example of this. Mr Micawber’s financial woes, we learn, are a result of his own financial mismanagement and his inability to live by his own adage: ‘Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen and six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual

¹⁵⁶ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 69.

¹⁵⁷ *Bleak House*, p. 307.

¹⁵⁸ *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁹ *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 4.

¹⁶⁰ Arthur Humphreys, ‘The Cheeryble Brothers’, *The Dickensian*, Vol. 1, No. 4, April 1905, *Internet Archive* (<https://archive.org/stream/dickensianvolum00englgoog#page/n100/mode/2up>), p. 103.

expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery'.¹⁶¹ Despite individual accountability, Dickens's portrayal of money lenders and extortionate rates of interest is reflective of a society preying on the weak and the vulnerable, and his portrayal of this aspect of nineteenth century life and identity has relevance to modern contemporary British life in the form of pay-day loans. Here too extortionate rates of interest are applied to those who are desperate and have no choice if they want to pay their bills and feed their children. They too, as in Dickens's portrayal, prey on the weak and the vulnerable, for 'money makes money',¹⁶² and those with money can use it to prey upon the weak to make more money. From a utilitarian, free-market perspective, however, this is good business practice as people 'may do anything lawful, for money',¹⁶³ and, as we have seen, anyone with a contrasting view that this is hugely damaging for society is deemed a 'radical'¹⁶⁴ or a 'dangerous socialist'.¹⁶⁵ To Dickens, as reflected in his novels and in *All the Year Round's* 'Slavery in England', national wealth is based on the exploitation of the poor and an impoverished workforce.¹⁶⁶

We see then, through Dickens's portrayal of wealth in his novels and work, that Mammonism, hereditary power entrenchment, and unregulated, free-market utilitarianism was at the heart of British nineteenth-century life, and how this corrupted and corroded all levels of society. We see also that scorn and disdain, though not universal, was a general attitude of the rich to the poor, and that it was the poor's 'own fault' that they were poor.¹⁶⁷ We also learn that it is 'Not English' to interfere in free-market, laissez faire utilitarianism in trying to eradicate poverty and

¹⁶¹ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (New York: Vintage Books), p. 174.

¹⁶² *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 459.

¹⁶³ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 796.

¹⁶⁴ *Little Dorrit*, p. 394.

¹⁶⁵ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 165.

¹⁶⁶ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 23.

¹⁶⁷ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 143.

create a fairer society.¹⁶⁸ It is a characteristic, and an English ruling and upper class identity, that imposes itself on another main theme of Dickens's work, that of empire.

¹⁶⁸ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 144.

Chapter Three: Empire

Together with poverty and wealth the British Empire was also greatly influential in informing Dickens's work in reflecting British national character and identity, and the 1850s saw three significant national events that would prove pivotal in shaping his writing and novels of the period: The Great Exhibition (1851), the Crimean War (1855) and the Indian Mutiny (1857). The decade was also prolific for Dickens and he published *David Copperfield* (1850), *Bleak House* (1853), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1857) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) during the period. He also began the publication of the weekly journal, *Household Words* (1850), which he edited and contributed to, and wrote *A Child's History of England* (1851) and *The Lazy tour of Two Idle Apprentices* (1857) that were serialised in the journal. 1859 also saw *Household Words* morph into *All the Year Round*, another weekly journal published and headed by Dickens. Within these works of the decade, and works in the next, such as *Great Expectations* (1861) and *Our Mutual Friend*, a reflection of British life and society at the time the nation witnessed these momentous events can be seen, and it is British society and Britain's sense of national identity, as revealed through Dickens's work's treatment of Britain's relationship with the wider world and Britain's role in it through its empire, that this chapter is concerned with.

The British Empire, for Dickens, represented an exotic place for his characters to disappear into, find riches in, and reappear from. This followed a tradition of nineteenth-century writers who used the British Empire as a plot device. Jane Austen, in *Mansfield Park* (1814), uses the West Indies as a place for Sir Thomas Bertram to disappear to for a lengthy period of time to provide the space for her young wealthy characters' moral disintegration in contrast to her principle character. In *Jane Eyre*

(1847) a dark secret from Mr Rochester's incursion in the colonies in Jamaica emerges to wreak havoc on the English idyll, eventually burning down Thornfield Hall. The character, Bertha Antoinette Mason, is described as having a discoloured savage face,¹⁶⁹ and has been declared mad and locked away in the attic. These examples are revealing because they are not colonial adventure novels in the shape of Rudyard Kipling or H. Rider Haggard, they are Victorian society novels, and their allusion to and use of the colonies shows how the British Empire had pervaded British life at all levels, placing society, and the novels that reflect it, within a wider framework. In *Mary Barton* (1848) the river Mersey is full of sails and ensigns from all over the world,¹⁷⁰ while in *Our Mutual Friend*, the London dockside is a place for characters like Mr Venus to acquire all manner of exotic curiosities for his taxidermist shop, like parrots and rattlesnakes.¹⁷¹ The allure of empire and the colonies was also reflected at the time by the increasing number of people who viewed the empire as an attractive proposition and destination to start a new life; numbers that saw, during the 1850s, 250,000 people a year emigrating to the colonies to escape the poverty and crowded slums at home.¹⁷² This desire and chance to start again and have a new life is also reflected in Dickens's work. In *David Copperfield*, Mr Micawber, a kind, good natured man, unfortunate in his finances, who never gives up hope that something will turn up, flees his creditors for a new life in Australia. There he succeeds and becomes a respected and distinguished townsman, magistrate, and a 'diligent and esteemed' correspondent.¹⁷³ The Lammles, also, in *Our Mutual Friend*, disappear abroad after their schemes for clearing their debts and acquiring the wealth their

¹⁶⁹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 311.

¹⁷⁰ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 280-281.

¹⁷¹ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 492.

¹⁷² Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux, *Charles Dickens in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 284.

¹⁷³ *David Copperfield*, p. 857.

position in Society demands end in failure. It is a theme of viewing the empire and the world as a place to flee and start again that is also present in *Little Dorrit*. Here Dickens describes the Grand Tour, as well as a form of recognition and rite of passage for the well-to-do and upper class, who subscribe to the necessity of seeing the sights and litany of objects of cultivation ‘through other people’s eyes’,¹⁷⁴ as a ‘superior sort of Marshalsea’: a place where people flee to escape debt, wedlock, the law, and idleness at home.¹⁷⁵ Dickens’s reference here to the debtors’ jail has strong allusions to Botany Bay and the penal colony in Australia and suggests a British view of empire and the world as a place to wash away their sins and their sinners; a point in turn that suggests a moral double standard. The empire, then, was seen as a place for people and characters to start a new life, and Dickens also, in his private life, sent his sons out to the colonies and saw the empire as a way to teach them to be ‘autonomous and not depend upon the reputation and generosity of their famous father’.¹⁷⁶

The British Empire, as has been touched upon, was also used by society to send its convicts and undesirables to a penal colony in Australia, and this is also reflected in Dickens’s work. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Wackford Squeers, a low individual who delights in inflicting cruel punishments on his pupils—his ‘other blacks’—,¹⁷⁷ gets his comeuppance by being sentenced to transportation to Australia; but the most famous of Dickens’s convicts is Abel Magwitch in *Great Expectations* (1861). Here the empire is used as a great source of wealth as well as a place to dispose of criminals. Magwitch returns from Australia having made a fortune as a sheep farmer in an implausibly short period of time. It is then revealed that it is he, instead of Miss Havisham, who is Pip’s benefactor. Magwitch succeeds in Australia.

¹⁷⁴ *Little Dorrit*, p. 433.

¹⁷⁵ *Little Dorrit*, p. 491.

¹⁷⁶ Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux, *Charles Dickens in Context*, p. 284.

¹⁷⁷ *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 99.

He did well, ‘wonderfully well’, and was ‘famous for it’,¹⁷⁸ but he also alludes to the hardship and difficulties he faced as an ex-convict, describing how he lived rough and experienced prejudice from the settlers’ in stigmatising him as a lucky, ignorant convict,¹⁷⁹ thereby reflecting the resentment felt by the settlers’ for Britain in transporting its worst criminals to the country. Magwitch, in relating these experiences, then receives prejudice from Pip, who considers him to have ‘a savage air that no dress could tame’ and to be a convict through and through.¹⁸⁰ Criminal transportation to the empire was considered desirable and legitimate, and *Household Words* described the practice as being indispensable to the discovery and opening up of Australia and its fertile soil, and that it benefited that land as well as Britain;¹⁸¹ but in solving a social problem at home, by exporting its felons, Britain created a colonial problem as many settlers were outraged by the idea that freed convicts could create a life for themselves and eventually become their equals. It was also a concern expressed in Britain that the ultimate threat of transportation for life would lose some of its deterrence if convicts were seen to have a good life after serving their sentence.¹⁸²

The supposed finality of the transportation of British convicts in British society is also revealed in Magwitch’s fate: Magwitch can be redeemed and can create a new life for himself in Australia, but not in Britain. He cannot return, even a character like Magwitch, who is flawed but redeemed, and a possessor of decent, honourable intentions. If he does return, as he does in the novel, he will be hanged ‘if

¹⁷⁸ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 290.

¹⁷⁹ *Great Expectations*, p. 293.

¹⁸⁰ *Great Expectations*, p. 309.

¹⁸¹ Irwin, ‘The Antecedents of Australia’, *Household Words*, 14/1/1854, Vol. 8, No. 199, *Dickens Journals Online* (<http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-viii/page-477.html>)

¹⁸² Piers Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire 1781-1997* (Jonathan Cape, London, 2007), p. 71

took'.¹⁸³ As Magwitch explains to Pip, 'It's death to come back'.¹⁸⁴ Trapped and with no way out Magwitch dies after almost drowning in the Thames; a fate, of almost drowning in the same river, initially spared the far more treacherous character of Roger Riderhood in *Our Mutual Friend*.¹⁸⁵ In Magwitch's case, of never being able to return, even for less serious offences, it is an example of English law, customs and jurisdictions superseding all others, and of its bar being 'scattered over the face of the earth.'¹⁸⁶

Society's unease of unsavoury characters, criminals and savages returning from empire, were it should be impossible for them to do so—lifers were banished for life—, to wreck havoc on society is also reflected. Riderhood, in *Our Mutual Friend*, returns from death and so does Magwitch. Neither should return, but both do to the great unease, fear and consternation of society. Both characters, in this sense, reflect an early fear of reverse-colonisation and infiltration of the colonies; of a fear of the return of the 'other'; of the savage, native or criminal, returning to infiltrate British society and tear its citizens to pieces or sink their 'strongest fangs'¹⁸⁷ into English decorum and respectability like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1899), and, in the process, extract the English drive, strength, and '[v]igorous Saxon spirit'¹⁸⁸ that exposed such devils in the first place. Such fears represent an inherent reality of all empires: that of the ruled rising up against the ruler, and reflects an anxiety ever present in the British imperial psyche since the loss of its American colonies (1775) and Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire* (1776); a book which Dickens uses in *Our Mutual Friend* to reflect his unease over the future of the British Empire after the

¹⁸³ *Great Expectations*, p. 294.

¹⁸⁴ *Great Expectations*, p. 294.

¹⁸⁵ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 439.

¹⁸⁶ *Bleak House*, p. 278.

¹⁸⁷ *Great Expectations*, p. 302.

¹⁸⁸ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 95.

Crimean war and the Indian Mutiny, a point emphasised by Mr Boffin's misreading of Roman for 'Rooshan'.¹⁸⁹

The empire is also viewed as a place of great wealth elsewhere in *Great Expectations*. Herbert Pocket, a self-declared capitalist, and Pip's friend in London, declares that the empire is a place where '[t]remendous' fortunes are made, from silks, shawls, spices and dyes in the East Indies, to sugar, tobacco and rum in the West Indies and elephant tusks in Ceylon (Sri Lanka),¹⁹⁰ and, although Herbert's musings are those of a fantasist and a dreamer, Dickens's readers would have been hard pressed to distinguish this from reality, especially given their experiences of the excess of Great Exhibition. Pip eventually joins Herbert at his mercantile business in Cairo as a clerk, eventually rising up through the firm to become a partner. There he does well, 'very well',¹⁹¹ and earns a good living, though not a tremendous fortune. The idea of the empire being a paradise and a place of plenty, as opposed to the repressive poverty in Britain, is also reflected in Dickens's journalism. In *Household Words* 'Pictures of Life in Australia' an idyllic paradise is depicted with 'no rent, no taxes' and 'no rates' 'to disturb the peace of the occupier' in their 'little fairy home'.¹⁹² The article describes the presence of the bee 'sent "as a colonist" from England'¹⁹³ to pollinate the lush fertile idyll. Its repeated reference of the rose also brings to mind the English rose and the suggestion that England is the original paradise on earth that has bestowed upon the world, through its empire, other paradises in its image, and that it is a source of great national pride to think that 'to England should belong the right to

¹⁸⁹ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 59.

¹⁹⁰ *Great Expectations*, p. 168.

¹⁹¹ *Great Expectations*, p. 439.

¹⁹² Caroline Chrisholm, Richard H. Horne, 'Pictures of Life in Australia', *Household Words*, 22/06/1850, Vol. 1, No. 13, *Dickens Journals Online* (<http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-i/page-309.html>).

¹⁹³ Caroline Chrisholm, Richard H. Horne, 'Pictures of Life in Australia'.

own them.¹⁹⁴ This idea of spreading English values and English communities across the globe can also be seen in Dickens support of the emigration of the poor to Australia.¹⁹⁵ This Dickens believes could go some way to solving poverty at home whilst at the same time establishing English communities in the colonies loyal to England. The problem, Dickens envisaged, was funding, and the private loans needed to ensure transportation to and from the colonies in the reuniting of families. It is interesting here to compare the poor, in relation to ‘The Condition of England Question’ with the transportation of convicts. The convicts, whilst enduring horrendous conditions of sail and sentence when arriving in Australia—conditions they would similarly experience in Newgate—,¹⁹⁶ are transported by the state, and when their sentences are served, for those of lesser crimes, have the prospect of better opportunities and a better life than the poor in Britain. Transportation for life, then, is only for life from Britain, whereas extreme poverty for the poor in Britain is a life sentence for life with next to no opportunity to escape. In this respect, as Dickens himself alludes to in *Bleak House*, the poor would be better off if they were convicted criminals,¹⁹⁷ especially as the treadmill seems almost indistinguishable from breaking rocks in a workhouse.

Within the immensely positive influence of the mother country, then, the empire was viewed as a conglomerate of countries and regions that Britain has a right to own. This is not to say that people did not prosper and have good lives in the colonies, in Canada and Australia, and beyond the empire in America, as they invariably did, it is just that the portrayal of a picture-perfect life of plenty with no

¹⁹⁴ Caroline Chrisholm, Richard H. Horne, ‘Pictures of Life in Australia’ (<http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-i/page-307.html>).

¹⁹⁵ Caroline Chrisholm, Charles Dickens, ‘A Bundle of Emigrants’ Letters’, *Household Words*, 30/03/1850, Vol. 1, No. 1, *Dickens Journals Online* (<http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-i/page-19.html>).

¹⁹⁶ Charles Dickens, ‘A Visit to Newgate’, *Sketches by Boz* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 234.

¹⁹⁷ *Bleak House*, 455.

hardship was an exaggeration. In reality, hardship was endured and great wealth from the British Empire was only attained by a small number of individuals, including slave owners in the West Indies, of which, at the time of abolition, there were 67 in the House of Lords,¹⁹⁸ and individual governors in India;¹⁹⁹ and, in 1857, before being nationalised by the British Government, the East India Company's debts amounted to £50 million pounds.²⁰⁰

As well as the empire representing a convenient place for characters to start over, the three major national events of the 1850s greatly inspired and influenced Dickens's work in different ways, and the first, the Great Exhibition, symbolised British poverty, wealth and empire in a good and a bad way. The exhibition was a huge success and was visited by six million people in six months.²⁰¹ Initially Dickens was supportive and applauded the achievement of Prince Albert for organising such a showpiece.²⁰² His support soon dwindled, however, and Dickens came to view the exhibition as a 'frivolous monument to British self-aggrandisement and pomposity'.²⁰³ The exhibition was also viewed more widely as being a distraction from domestic troubles and its opening followed the 'hungry 40s' and a deep recession between 1837 and 1843. Revolutions in Europe in 1848 in France, Prussia, Austria and Italy, and a great disaster and famine in Ireland, were also grounds for great concern within the British establishment, especially considering the civil unrest and Chartist riots throughout the 1840s, culminating in the last Chartist rally, but by no means the last unrest, in 1848. This view of the exhibition being a distraction from

¹⁹⁸ David Olusoga, *Britain's Forgotten Slave Owners* (BBC television documentary series, BBC2, 15/07/2015)

¹⁹⁹ Piers Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire 1781-1997*, p. 32.

²⁰⁰ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 96.

²⁰¹ Louise Purbrick, ed. *The Great Exhibition of 1851* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2001), p. 2.

²⁰² K.J. Fielding, *The Speeches of Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 119.

²⁰³ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 80.

domestic discord and civil unrest is reflected in *Punch's* illustration, 'The Shipwrecked Ministers saved by the Great Exhibition Steamer', published in 1851, showing ministers of the Government, lost at sea, being rescued by the Great Ship Exhibition (Appendix 4). Benjamin Disraeli, also, gave voice to such views by calling the exhibition 'a godsend to the Government [as it diverts] public attention away from its blunders'.²⁰⁴ Dickens also came to resent the exhibition, because although he thought it a 'very remarkable thing in itself',²⁰⁵ and an indication of progress and advancement of civilisation, particularly over less civilised races such as China, as seen in *Household Words* 'The Great Exhibition and the Little One',²⁰⁶ he also considered it grotesque that a rich, leading, industrial nation such as Britain that could organise and stage such a grand, worldly showpiece, could not attend to and solve its startling degrees of poverty.²⁰⁷ His words echo Carlyle in *Past and Present* who thought it a 'great injustice' that two million people were living in workhouses at a time when Britain had 'more riches than any nation ever had before.'²⁰⁸ Dickens also linked the exhibition to the workhouses. In a letter to Mrs Watson, written during the exhibition, he relates the story of how a young boy had become lost during a school trip to the exhibition and how he had been found by police that night in Hammersmith. He describes how the boy had thought the Hammersmith workhouse, where he had stayed the night before being collected by his mother in the morning, to be part of the exhibition.²⁰⁹ Dickens also detested the 'self-congratulatory tone' of the exhibition, and considered 1851, instead of representative of a golden age of British

²⁰⁴ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 28.

²⁰⁵ Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Nina Burgis, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens, Volume Seven, 1853-1855* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 453.

²⁰⁶ Charles Dickens, Richard H. Horne, 'The Great Exhibition and the Little One', *Household Words*, 05/07/1851, Vol. 3, No. 67, *Dickens Journals Online* (<http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-iii/page-356.html>)

²⁰⁷ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 4.

²⁰⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1931), p. 6.

²⁰⁹ Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Nina Burgis, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens, Volume Six, 1850-1852* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 429.

glory and pre-eminence—a view not recognised in the individual lives of the vast crowds of people who flocked to see the exhibition—,²¹⁰ to be a year of ‘Crime, Disease, Poverty and Ignorance’.²¹¹ It is an illustration of how history can be shaped, moulded and written by the powerful and the few at the expense of the many, and Dickens’s view was shared by *Punch* who published its own illustration of an industrial exhibition highlighting the grim reality of working Britain (Appendix 5).

As well as championing the poor and tirelessly campaigning for social reform, Dickens also linked the oppressed at home to the riches of empire; riches that had little benefit to the vast majority of the country and only benefited a small percentage at the top;²¹² and, throughout his career he drew comparisons between the working class at home and the colonised abroad.²¹³ In *Bleak House*, in his role as omniscient narrator overlooking the slum of Tom’s-all-alone, Dickens wistfully laments that ‘it might be better for the national glory even that the sun should sometimes set upon the British dominions, than that it should ever rise upon so vile a wonder as Tom.’²¹⁴ Britain, hence, in Dickens’s view, would be more glorious without its dominions if it eradicated poverty at home, and, in relation to Dickens’s interconnectedness of empire and poverty, and his story of the boy at the exhibition, the name of the novel, *Bleak House*, has been suggested to originate from an amalgamation of the Crystal Palace, the workhouse and Tom-all-alone’s.²¹⁵ In *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), Dickens describes how London is lit up in a ‘rich and glittering profusion’ of ‘luxurious ornament’, ‘brought from every quarter of the world.’²¹⁶ He describes ‘half-naked shivering figures’ with ‘hungry eyes’ stopping to ‘gaze at Chinese shawls and golden

²¹⁰ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991), p. 633.

²¹¹ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 632.

²¹² Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 3.

²¹³ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 171.

²¹⁴ *Bleak House*, p. 657

²¹⁵ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 29.

²¹⁶ *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 408.

stuffs of India'.²¹⁷ He also, in linking wealth and poverty, and in this instance, wealth acquired through empire, and poverty, highlights the close, 'mingled' and 'jumbled', proximity of the splendidly exotic and alluring Emporiums to that of 'screws and irons for the crooked', 'drugs for the sick', 'coffins for the dead' and 'churchyards for the buried'.²¹⁸ Dickens here, as well as evoking the huge inequality between hunger, 'rags' and 'glittering profusion', alludes to Hans Holbein,²¹⁹ whom he mistakenly refers to as Dutch;²²⁰ but the scene also evokes the Dutch painter, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's, *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* (1559) (Appendix 6). Dickens's reference to death, the sick and the infirm also evokes Elder's other work, *The Triumph of Death* (1562) (appendix 7), and Dickens's message here is that the endless pursuit of the wealth and riches of empire at the expense of the poor will lead to death, disease and pestilence for all. Dickens also, in relation to *The Triumph of Death*, in *Little Dorrit*, refers to the 'East as being the country of the plague',²²¹ a point that echoes John Jarndyce's anxiety, in *Bleak House*, over his ominous 'east wind'.²²²

The interconnectedness between empire and poverty can also be seen in *All the Year Round*'s 'Slavery in England', and in the language used in Dickens's novels used to describe the poor, such as 'savage' and 'slave', depictions that, whilst emphasising the similarities and connectedness between the working poor in Britain and the slave in North America or the 'savage' in Borrioboola Gha,²²³ also has the effect of emphasising their 'otherness', and differences, and seeming incapability of rising above their status. The poor working class, as we have seen, are not equal to the

²¹⁷ *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 409.

²¹⁸ *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 409.

²¹⁹ *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 587n.

²²⁰ *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 409.

²²¹ *Little Dorrit*, p. 29.

²²² *Bleak House*, p. 77.

²²³ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 2.

Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen and Dickens's own social strata, and neither are the indigenous peoples of the colonies. They are also not equal to each other.

Yet as well as criticising the Great Exhibition and the British Empire for ignoring, in its vainglorious pursuit of glory and riches abroad, the desperate need of social reform and the eradication of poverty at home, Dickens also contributes to the sense of superiority and entitlement that drives it. In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens mocks English tendencies of assuming that all foreigners should adhere and aspire to English language and customs and that English was the 'mother tongue of the whole world, only the people were too stupid to know it.'²²⁴ In *Our Mutual Friend* he ridicules Podsnappery, and by implication the established ruling class, for implying the superiority of the English over all other nations in declaring Britain 'blessed' by providence, at the expense of all others, and that the Englishman's character is not equalled anywhere among the 'Nations of the Earth.'²²⁵ Yet in attitudes to foreigners and other nations, Dickens is ambiguous, as elsewhere, and reinforces English superiority. This can be seen in *Household Words* seeming to support the view that Dickens mocks of English being the mother tongue of the world by declaring that 'nobody is at the trouble to learn the hodge-podge of a language called Belgian' and that Ostend is the 'most wretched of wretched places'.²²⁶ In *Little Dorrit* he displays an unsympathetic view of foreign poor, referring to the poor viewed along Mr Dorrit's tour of Italy as 'savage herdsmen'²²⁷ and 'mites' living in houses like 'rotten pre-Adamite cheeses'.²²⁸ He refers to 'beggars of all sorts everywhere', whose 'squalid villages' are filled with 'hovel[s] without a gap', where the 'miserable creatures' have

²²⁴ *Little Dorrit*, p. 769.

²²⁵ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 137.

²²⁶ William Howitt, 'A Pilgrimage to the Great Exhibition from Abroad', *Household Words*, 28/06/1851, Vol. 3, No. 66, *Dickens Journals Online* (<http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-iii/page-321.html>)

²²⁷ *Little Dorrit*, p. 610.

²²⁸ *Little Dorrit*, p. 471.

no hope and nothing to do, make, grow, or eat, but die.²²⁹ It is a far cry from his portrayals of the English poor in Marshalsea's prison or Bleeding Heart Yard where the strong sense of community and decency sees the inhabitants' eager, despite their poverty and hardship, to see Mrs Plornish's shop succeed.²³⁰ Dickens also, though admiring Napoleon for promoting generals with talent on merit from very humble beginnings,²³¹ and viewing Paris as a great city, having lived there and travelled there for long periods, reverts to a tired traditional John Bull xenophobia of the French, referring to them as 'always howling' and their national anthem the most insurrectionary that was ever composed.²³² In *A Tale of Two Cities* the French poor are described as 'peasants' and ferocious 'savages', 'butchers' and 'wild animals', while the English characters in contrast are calm, reserved and dignified: honourable ladies and gentlemen trapped in the midst of a storm in a foreign land like the English at Cawnpore. Dickens's descriptions of the French greedily slurping spilled red wine from the street, squeezing it through handkerchiefs into infants' mouths, with tigerish smears about their mouths²³³ depicts them as a rabid, bestial people who drink blood. This savage 'otherness' is in stark contrast to his portrayal of the English rioters in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) as 'honest zealots', whom even the worst elements are explained away through bad governance.²³⁴ Dickens's use of describing Madam Defarge as a ruthless 'Tigress'²³⁵ and a wife of Lucifer,²³⁶ without virtue or pity, who conceals a sharpened dagger,²³⁷ links the novel to the Indian Mutiny (1857); and, despite Madam Defarge's ferociousness, like the ferociousness of the Indian sepoy

²²⁹ *Little Dorrit*, p. 449.

²³⁰ *Little Dorrit*, p. 552.

²³¹ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 39.

²³² *Little Dorrit*, p. 28.

²³³ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 31-32.

²³⁴ Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 403.

²³⁵ *A Tale of Two Cities*, p. 347.

²³⁶ *A Tale of Two Cities*, p. 351.

²³⁷ *A Tale of Two Cities*, p. 347.

with a dagger concealed around his waist, she cannot get the better of Miss Pross because she is an ‘Englishwoman.’²³⁸ *A Tale of Two Cities*, whilst warning of the threat of an uprising or revolution in Britain due to continued misrule and lack of social reform, also reveals Dickens’s views on race and English superiority over other races and nations, and, by reflection, British Society’s. We see this in his letters and speeches of the time and in his novels. In *Bleak house* we see the superiority of the English described as ‘the strong Saxon face [...], a picture of resolution and perseverance’.²³⁹ The characteristics of the face, then, are strong, resolute and persevering only because they are Saxon. There is no class element here though as the face belongs to Mr Rouncewell, an ironmaster, who is well below the station of those he is addressing, although this elevates the British working classes and British poor above that of their equivalent class of other nations and colonial peoples. We also see this in Dickens’s confirmed belief that the “‘English-Saxon” [...] has been the greatest character among the nations of the earth.”’²⁴⁰ In *Little Dorrit*, Cavalletto, the multicultural foreigner who speaks both Italian and French, and after his collision with a mail coach is not understood by the English crowd,²⁴¹ displays a passion and vehemence that would have been ‘absolute madness in any man of Northern origin’.²⁴² Dickens’s views on English and Anglo-Saxon superiority and his reaction to the Indian Mutiny also had a racial element that reflected British society of the time.

India, prior to the Great Exhibition, was largely a mystery to the British general public²⁴³ and represented a place of not much interest.²⁴⁴ The Exhibition then regaled on the public an India as an exotic place of great riches, inhabited by a docile

²³⁸ *A Tale of Two Cities*, p. 351.

²³⁹ *Bleak House*, p. 417.

²⁴⁰ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, p. 585.

²⁴¹ *Little Dorrit*, p. 164.

²⁴² *Little Dorrit*, p. 648.

²⁴³ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 96.

²⁴⁴ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 52.

obedient people, thankful and subservient to their British rulers.²⁴⁵ Yet India had always been a place of simmering tension, highlighted by a number of uprisings that had taken place before the Mutiny in 1764, 1782 and 1843.²⁴⁶ The Mutiny itself though, and the scale of the Mutiny, was a great shock and set back to British Imperial ambitions. Britain was outraged, particularly by the massacre at Cawnpore, and Dickens's reaction is well documented. In a letter to Miss Coutts in October 1857, referring to the Mutiny, Dickens's declared his desire, if he were Commander in Chief in India, to have the whole Hindoo race—'dogs—low, treacherous, murderous, tigerous villains [...] who would rend you to pieces at half and hour's notice'—exterminated 'from the face of the earth'.²⁴⁷ We see the language used here by Dickens, 'tigerous' and 'rend you to pieces', is remarkably similar to that used in *A Tale of Two Cities* to describe Madam Defarge and the French mob. The outrage felt by Dickens and the nation as a whole by the Cawnpore massacre can best be described by William Howard Russell of *The London Times*, who considered that the outrage and sense of 'burning vengeance' was the result of the act being committed by a 'subject race'.²⁴⁸ The particular aggravation to Britain and the British was that 'black men' had dared to 'shed the blood of their masters and mistresses, and to butcher poor helpless ladies and children, who were the women and offspring of the dominant and conquering people'.²⁴⁹ Dickens also had a personal connection to the uprising, with his 'second boy' being attached to the 42nd Highlanders, whose regiment had fought at the battle of Cawnpore, and in the 'thick of the Indian

²⁴⁵ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 119.

²⁴⁶ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 91.

²⁴⁷ Mamie Dickens, Georgina Hogarth, *The Letters of Charles Dickens 1833-1870* (London: MacMillan and Co, 1893), p. 473.

²⁴⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature Vol E: The Victorian Age* (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), p. 1643.

²⁴⁹ *Norton Anthology*, p. 1643.

tussle'.²⁵⁰ Dickens's sense of British superiority is also revealed in his speeches. In a speech for the Hospital of Sick Children (1858) Dickens reminds his audience that 'at this moment in India employed in punishing great treachery and cruelty, and in upholding a government which, whatever its faults, had proved immeasurable superior to any Asiatic rule. [cheers]'.²⁵¹ Dickens here could be alluding to progress and industrialisation, in which Britain led the way, and it was a sentiment and comparison shared in *Household Words* 'The Great Exhibition and the Little One' (1851). The speech is also revealing, though, because it shows that while Dickens is very critical of 'Britannia' (Podsnappery, Barnacleism, nepotism and corruption)²⁵² at home, he is firmly in the camp of Britannia perceived British superiority when it comes to empire and the colonies. The reaction of the crowd also indicates that this was a view widely shared in society. The Britannia allusion is also revealed in Dickens's reaction to the Jamaican Insurrection (1865). In a letter to M. De Cerjat in November Dickens expresses his outrage at the insurrection and suggests that but for the 'blacks in Jamaica being over-impatient [...] the whites might have been exterminated'. He ends with a rallying cry of 'Britons never, never, never!— [shall be slaves]'.²⁵³ It is an unfortunate phrase considering Britain's previous slave holding in the country, and Dickens, in referencing Britannia, again shows that while misrule at home is unacceptable, misrule in the colonies of empire is of much less importance. It is also a culmination of Dickens's change of stance when it came to slavery, reflecting, ironically, a utilitarian pragmatism and self-interest with regard to its eradication: the very thing he rails against in virtually all of his novels. We see this in

²⁵⁰ Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, and Nina Burgis, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens, Volume Eight, 1850-1852* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.516.

²⁵¹ Charles Dickens, 'Hospital for sick Children, 9 February 1858', K.J. Fielding, *Speeches of Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p.246.

²⁵² *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 243.

²⁵³ 'Letter to M. De Cerjat, November 1865', Mamie Dickens, Georgina Hogarth, *The Letters of Charles Dickens 1833-1870* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1893), p. 591.

Dickens's support for the South during the American civil war, in which he considered that slavery was being used by the North as an excuse to stop the South reaching economic parity, and that in reality, as every 'reasonable creature may know, if willing' that the 'North hates the Negro'. Ironically, his use of language here of 'reasonable creature' has echoes of the language in *Hard Times* used to criticise and show the pernicious effects of utilitarianism and political economy in education. Dickens was more concerned with free trade and the protection of Britain's textile industry and workers' jobs, as portrayed in novels like *Hard Times*; yet in applying laissez-faire political economy to the issue of slavery Dickens was condoning and justifying a barbaric practice, and giving 'currency to Southern bonds';²⁵⁴ and Dickens's economic argument is given less credence by the strong support among the Lancashire mill workers for the eradication of slavery, culminating in a letter from President Lincoln and a statue erected in his honour in Manchester.²⁵⁵ Dickens's argument was a case of tacitly condoning one evil in the hope that it helped eradicate another; but as we have already seen with two million people in Britain living in workhouses at a time when Britain was richer than any nation before it,²⁵⁶ trade, riches and wealth had not solved the 'Condition of England' question and it would be unlikely to do so in the future because it was founded on mammonism, political economy and utilitarian self-interest. Subsequently, the reality would more likely have been the continuation of two evils rather than the eradication of one at the expense of the other. Dickens's support for the South also reflected large sways of the British

²⁵⁴ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 364.

²⁵⁵ 'Lincoln's great debt to Manchester', *The Guardian*, Monday 4 February 2013 (<http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/from-the-archive-blog/2013/feb/04/lincoln-oscars-manchester-cotton-abraham>)

²⁵⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, p. 6.

public,²⁵⁷ the aristocracy,²⁵⁸ and the British Government who granted the South belligerent status in 1861, the first step towards formal recognition and possible war with America.²⁵⁹ Gladstone, also, as the Chancellor of the Exchequer, in a speech in Newcastle in 1862, declared that whatever our opinions are about slavery, there is little doubt that Jefferson Davis had created ‘a nation’.²⁶⁰ Gladstone also spoke out against the Abolition of Slavery Act of 1833, demanding significant compensation,²⁶¹ and his father, John Gladstone, was a large slave holder in plantations across the Caribbean.²⁶² Such breadth and depth of support suggests that the belief in white Anglo-Saxon racial superiority was widespread in society and part of Britain’s national identity. It also suggests, with strong support for abolition, a country split down the middle on race and utilitarian political economy, and shows that support of the South was not based purely on economic considerations, but was also founded on racial superiority.

Dickens’s change of stance on slavery and the contrast between his earlier condemnation of the practice in *American Notes* (1842) demonstrates that his views on race had become more extreme during the 1850s.²⁶³ It also indicates a reaction against telescopic philanthropy and abolitionism, which he considered diverted attention away from poverty at home; a view we can see endorsed in *All The Year Round*’s ‘Slavery in England’ and in Dickens’s representation of Mrs Jellyby in *Bleak House*. We also see it in representations of Jo, who breakfasts on a ‘dirty bit of bread’

²⁵⁷ Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 178.

²⁵⁸ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, p. 363.

²⁵⁹ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, p. 363.

²⁶⁰ Howard Jones, *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 182.

²⁶¹ Roland Quinault, ‘Gladstone and Slavery’, *The Historical Journal* (Cambridge University Press, Vol. 52, No. 2, Jun 2009, <http://www.jstor.org/voyager.chester.ac.uk/stable/40264175> p. 369.

²⁶² David Olusoga, *Britain’s Forgotten Slave Owners* (BBC television documentary series, BBC2, 15/07/2015)

²⁶³ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 43.

on the step of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.²⁶⁴ Dickens's increased belief in white Anglo-Saxon racial superiority also highlighted an increase in racism after slavery was abolished in the British Empire 'as people sought to uphold their precarious claim to economic, social and racial superiority.'²⁶⁵ In his infamous article, 'The Noble Savage' (1853), Dickens mocks the notion that black Americans or black colonials can ever achieve equal status to that of their white superiors. He suggests they should be 'civilised off the face of the earth'²⁶⁶ and that the world would be 'all the better' when they 'pass away' and their 'place knows them no more'.²⁶⁷ Grace Moore, in *Dickens and Empire*, suggests that the article was uncharacteristic and an extreme reaction to the growth of abolitionism and possibly to the attention given to the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). She suggests that the passages allude to a Christian message of civilising native Africans and lifting them out of their place so that 'their place knows them know more'.²⁶⁸ This explanation, however, seems to contradict Dickens's own view in *The Niger Expedition* (1848) in which he considers the African race so far below civilised men that only a fool would try to railroad them into civilisation.²⁶⁹ This view ties in with the language used by Dickens in 'The Noble Savage' and elsewhere with society's appropriation of science in supporting racial superiority.

The use of craniology and phrenology in Victorian society was prominent in attempting to determine a genetic predisposition to crime and criminality. Magwitch in *Great Expectations* recalls having had his head measured,²⁷⁰ although Dickens argues against the practice through Magwitch suggesting they had better measured

²⁶⁴ *Bleak House*, p. 237.

²⁶⁵ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 57.

²⁶⁶ 'The Noble Savage', *Reprinted Pieces*, Charles Dickens (London: Chapman & Hall, 1899), p. 120.

²⁶⁷ 'The Noble Savage', p. 127.

²⁶⁸ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 69.

²⁶⁹ Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914*, p. 178.

²⁷⁰ *Great Expectations*, p. 317.

‘[his] stomach’ (because it was empty and a clearer source of criminality), his language, in regards to race, have clear undertones of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859) and natural selection—a discovery that was of great interest to Dickens and ‘must have altered his stance towards less developed races considerably’.²⁷¹ In this respect the language used in ‘The Noble Savage’ of ‘civilised off the face of the earth’ and ‘pass away’ suggests a belief that natural selection and the survival of the fittest will eventually lead to their eradication. The use of evolutionary language with regard to race is evident elsewhere in Dickens. In a letter to Samuel Cartwright in 1868 Dickens describes the ‘stupendous absurdity’ of emancipated slaves becoming fully integrated into society, and that their ‘dull’, ‘lounging’, incapability to learn meant that they could never hold their own against a ‘striving, restless, shifty people.’ Consequently his impression is that the ‘race must *fade* [my italics] out of the States very fast.’²⁷² The ending of the letter is also striking in how Dickens abruptly and seamlessly moves from racial prejudice to graceful social etiquette in sending kind regard to Mrs Cartwright; a reflection, I would contend, of the normality of racial prejudice in society. This wider, societal prevalence of racial superiority can also be seen in *The London Time*’s review of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In it Beecher Stowe’s novel is praised for its success and described as a decided hit that assails the heart.²⁷³ Stowe is then ridiculed for, having not contented herself with ‘proving the infamy of the slave system’, she ‘ludicrously’ attempts to ‘establish the superiority [equality] of the African nature over that of the

²⁷¹ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 69.

²⁷² Storey, Graham, Tillotson, Kathleen and Burgis, Nina, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens, Volume Twelve, 1868-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 26.

²⁷³ ‘Uncle Tom in England’, *The London Times on Uncle Tom’s Cabin, A Review*, *The London Times*, Friday 3 September 1852 (Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/stream/uncletominenglan00newy#page/n3/mode/2up>), p. 1.

Anglo-Saxon, and of every other known race.’²⁷⁴ The review also refers to Beecher Stowe as an abolitionist and her book ‘a vehement and unrestrained argument in favour of her creed’.²⁷⁵ Abolitionists, then, according to *The London Times*, and presumably the society its readers represent, were of a different order; they were ‘others’; religious fanatics and zealots, instead of people of any political or religious persuasion who considered abolition a moral imperative. This classifying suggests uneasiness and a need to ascribe difference and cast people who hold different opinions as ‘others’ who are not ‘reasonable creatures’. It brings to mind Grace Moore’s observation that as abolition grew so did racism, as a reaction based on fear, and a reassertion of social, cultural and political superiority that was gradually being eroded. Such reaction and reassertion was observed in the American south after the civil war ended with four thousand two hundred freed slaves being lynched.²⁷⁶ The article also calls the evils of slavery, as asserted by the abolitionists, as ‘well-fed and comfortably-housed hypocrisy’,²⁷⁷ and these themes are replicated in *Household Words* ‘North American Slavery’ (1852). Here, although the article condemns slavery and argues for the slaves to be freed and paid for their work, they are described as being well treated, well fed and content to ‘lie down [within] their place among the farm animals’.²⁷⁸ Here the article’s repeated reference to dogs, horses, oxen, and farm animals is reminiscent of Dickens’s description of the poor in *Bleak House*.²⁷⁹ They are also ‘patted on the head’ and ‘played with’ by their masters.²⁸⁰ Both groups, then, are not equal to the rest society, only the conditions of one is more important than the

²⁷⁴ ‘Uncle Tom in England’, *The London Times* on Uncle Tom’s Cabin, A Review’, pp. 2-3.

²⁷⁵ ‘Uncle Tom in England’, *The London Times* on Uncle Tom’s Cabin, A Review’, p. 1.

²⁷⁶ Jessie Jackson, *Newsnight*, BBC2, 20/08/2015

²⁷⁷ ‘Uncle Tom in England’, *The London Times* on Uncle Tom’s Cabin, A Review’, p. 4.

²⁷⁸ Charles Dickens, Henry Morley, ‘North American Slavery’, *Household Words*, 18/09/1852, Vol. 6, No. 130, *Dickens Journals Online* (<http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-vi/page-3.html>), p. 3.

²⁷⁹ *Bleak House*, p. 237.

²⁸⁰ Charles Dickens, Henry Morley, ‘North American Slavery’, p. 3.

freedom of the other. Both articles stress the difference and the inferior otherness of the African-American slave, and their general disapproval of slavery is more akin to the disapproval of cruelty inflicted on lesser beings than on equal human beings—more akin to the unnecessary cruelty inflicted on animals—, a point supported by the views of Froude who dismissed the cruelty inflicted on slaves as a myth, as ‘[k]ind usage to animals is more economical than barbarity’.²⁸¹ This shows the universality of such views that forms part of British national identity of the period. In ‘North American Slavery’ the slaves’ transportation to Liberia is endorsed because of the incompatibility of their ‘slavish mentality’ with society;²⁸² a view which suggests a belief, like indicated in Dickens’s letter to Mr Cartwright, that they can never integrate into society and become fine, equal, upstanding citizens as portrayed in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and other works of the time such as Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), and in the tireless campaigning to change this mindset of Frederick Douglass. Both articles are also, as are Dickens’s views expressed elsewhere, reminiscent of Thomas Carlyle’s ‘The Nigger Question’ (1849). Here Carlyle also describes slaves as ‘all very happy and doing well’.²⁸³ It is a far cry from other cultural depictions of slavery at the time, such as Turner’s *The Slave Ship* (1840) (Appendix 8), and goes to support the argument of the time of those who were racially prejudiced or ultra laissez-faire free marketeers or both that black slaves led such contented lives that they would prefer to be ‘unfree’ under slavery than be emancipated.²⁸⁴ Carlyle then goes on to say that the black population in Britain, equal almost to the population of a Riding in Yorkshire are worth, in value, valour and

²⁸¹ James Anthony Froude, ‘From The English in the West Indies’, *The Norton Anthology*, p. 1651.

²⁸² Charles Dickens, Henry Morley, ‘North American Slavery’, p. 3.

²⁸³ Thomas Carlyle, *English and Other Critical Essays*, Ernest Rhys, ed., (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1915), p. 304.

²⁸⁴ Charles Dickens, Henry Morley, ‘North American Slavery’, p. 3.

intellect, 'perhaps one of the streets of Seven Dials'.²⁸⁵ These are sentiments we know, as already noted—that of the neglect of the poor white population, at home or in the colonies—that Dickens vehemently agreed with. Yet Carlyle goes further. He includes the black British population, and goes on to state that black slaves are at their station in slavery and are made to serve, under natural selection, the superior white race. It is inherently racist, and it is interesting that Dickens gave no heed to the possibility of damaging his reputation when dedicating *Hard Times* to Carlyle, a point which, despite Carlyle being Dickens's friend,²⁸⁶ I would contend, indicates that Dickens knew he would not damage his reputation because such views were widespread. At the very least they would command nowhere near the stigma and condemnation they would today. If people didn't agree, they would agree up to a point and be sympathetic. Dickens could have been more sympathetic to the treatment of slaves, even after their emancipation, as the prejudice and stigma they faced was remarkably similar to the prejudice and stigma faced by the poor in Britain. The Vagrancy Acts after the civil war included a host of punitive measures against freed slaves that effectively criminalised their lives. Those vagrant or unemployed or who could not prove employment were often sentenced to hard labour.²⁸⁷ This has an eerily chilling echo of the Vagrancy Act (1824) and the New Poor Law (1834) in Britain that effectively criminalised the poor with the threat of hard labour in the workhouse, and infringed on their rights of free movement as Betty Higden in *Our Mutual Friend* discovered. It was a case of racial discrimination in the former and economic and social discrimination in the latter.

²⁸⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *English and Other Critical Essays*, Ernest Rhys, ed., (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1915), p. 304.

²⁸⁶ 'Prize-Giving of the Institutional Association of Lancashire and Cheshire: Manchester', K.J. Fielding, *The Speeches of Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 284.

²⁸⁷ *Slavery by Another Name*, Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), (<http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/watch/>)

Ultimately, Dickens's view of empire was that it acted as both an opportunity and a hindrance to eradicating poverty and social injustice in Britain. He adhered to the view that there can be no glory of empire when conditions are so desperate for the poor at home.²⁸⁸ The end of the 1850s and the 1860s saw him resigned to viewing the empire as a disappointment. This can be seen in Dickens's reaction to the fiasco of the Crimean war at a time when ten thousand people died in London by cholera as a result of appalling conditions and poor sanitation. Dickens's inclusion, then, of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) in *Our Mutual Friend* perhaps indicates his dissatisfaction with empire and that he considered it to be entering its twilight years just as Dickens himself was.

²⁸⁸ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 40.

Conclusion

Despite his views on race—views and racial prejudice that reflected society—, Dickens worked tirelessly his whole life to champion the poor, eradicate horrendous scenes of poverty and destitution, and instigate social change. Through his representations of poverty he reflected a society that was indifferent, apathetic, and often scornful of the misery it saw in great numbers around it. It was a society that saw the poor and the deprived as a race apart; a human sub-species whose station in life mirrored its ability, virtue and morality. Dickens's work reflected a society, whose structure, it believed, was decreed by Providence; a society that viewed the poor as deserving of their poverty and felt no responsibility for its eradication.²⁸⁹

Dickens's novels fictionalised the work of social reformers like Engels, Mayhew and Chadwick, and so accurately reflected the scale and depth of poverty in Victorian Britain, a point which can be seen in one of Alexis Soyer's soup kitchens—one of many soup kitchens throughout London—in Farringdon Street that fed 8,000 – 10,000 people a day.²⁹⁰ The scale of Britain's poverty and destitution, then, was comparable to a nation and a society ravished through war, yet it occurred at a time of peace and great wealth, at a time of 'plethoric plenty', with 'gold walls, and full barns'.²⁹¹ It occurred at a time of Britain's predominance and ascendancy on the world stage through its empire. It was an irony not lost on Dickens, who saw that poverty, wealth and empire were inextricably linked and reflective of Britain's national identity.²⁹² Dickens was critical, as conveyed through his portrayal of Mrs Jellyby in *Bleak House*, of charity and patronage because he thought it let society and

²⁸⁹ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 143.

²⁹⁰ Liza Picard, *Victorian London: The Life of a City 1840-1870*, p. 91.

²⁹¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, p. 6.

²⁹² Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 18.

the ruling class of the hook. He knew that only Podsnappery and Barnacleism had the power to instigate real social change.

In this study I have sought to show how poverty, wealth and empire were inextricably linked and interwoven in society and through Dickens's work, and that they could not be adequately assessed in isolation. Dickens, though a social reformer, was not a socialist,²⁹³ although in Victorian society any hint of reformist inclinations for the improvement of the nation as a whole was deemed as 'Not English'²⁹⁴ and a sign of radicalism. It was an example of disinterested gentility needing to classify opinions and beliefs that differed from their own as 'creeds',²⁹⁵ thereby making it easier to dismiss such views as they originate from someone who is 'different' to themselves and their kin, and, therefore, their opinion cannot be right because if it were then they would not be 'different'. It is a paradoxical mechanism used to protect power and privilege and a great barrier to social reform. This disinterested characteristic of British gentility was not imposed externally by social critics—the politics of envy—, it was proudly acknowledged by gentility itself.²⁹⁶ Dickens, then, accurately portrayed the disinterestedness of 'Society' in *Little Dorrit*,²⁹⁷ reflecting the indifference and apathy of the aristocratic ruling class to Britain's desperate scenes of deprivation. Dickens conveys the huge barriers to social reform, and the connection of wealth, and its continued repression of the poor, through his portrayal of the disinterestedness of the political class. Mr Veneering, in *Our Mutual Friend*, only has to pay £5000 to become an MP. Political principle and conviction are not required (he has none, apart from making money), or ideally, political principles

²⁹³ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire*, p. 165.

²⁹⁴ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 144.

²⁹⁵ 'Uncle Tom in England', *The London Times on Uncle Tom's Cabin, A Review*, p. 1.

²⁹⁶ Stephen Wall, ed., *Little Dorrit*, Introduction (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p.xv.

²⁹⁷ *Little Dorrit*, p. 385.

identical to those of Lord Snigsworth would be the surest way of gaining acceptance into the house.²⁹⁸

Dickens, then, recognised the link between poverty and wealth in British society. His novels and work campaigned for top-down social reform, that was both morally right, and the only way to ensure the security and stability of all classes of society. His despair at a society based on Mammonism and profit-and-loss utilitarianism, that not only resisted social reform, but increased and exasperated poverty through exploitation, was matched by his gradual disillusionment of empire, as Mammonism in British society fed and sustained Britain's imperial ambitions, exploiting not just the poor at home but also the colonies of empire. Upon his death his wish for an 'unostentatious' funeral perhaps reflected this belief, and his interment at Westminster Abbey—a place he ironically thought full of cold, rich sculpture—²⁹⁹saw his glorious legacy appropriated by the state, a state whose vainglorious pursuit of wealth and riches, to the great detriment of its people, he was so critical of. Ultimately Dickens's work held a looking glass to society and reflected a nation with poverty, wealth and empire at its core.

Word count: 17,583.

²⁹⁸ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 244.

²⁹⁹ *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 508.

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Appendix 1



A CITY THOROUGHFARE

Gustave Doré, *A City Thoroughfare, London: A Pilgrimage* (1872)

Appendix 2



Gustave Doré, *Under the Trees—Regent's Park*, from *London, A Pilgrimage*, 1872

Appendix 3



William Hogarth, *Four Times of Day - Noon* (1738)

Appendix 4



‘The Shipwrecked Ministers saved by the Great Exhibition Steamer’ *Punch* 1851, *The Architectural Review*.



SPECIMENS FROM MR. PUNCH'S INDUSTRIAL EXHIBITION OF 1850.

(TO BE IMPROVED IN 1851).

‘Specimens from Mr Punch’s Industrial Exhibition of 1850’, *Punch* 1850



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* (1559)

Appendix 7



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Triumph of Death* (1562)

Appendix 8



J.M.W. Turner, *The Slave Ship* (1840)